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Opinion

The case for drafting in Barack Obama to help heal US-China relations



- The former US president's keynote speech at COP26 showed he still has the ability to unite and inspire a crowd to action
- Obama can speak to the issue of Beijing-Washington relations as a special citizen of the world, and China should welcome the idea

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

If fine oratory is a valuable art form, it is nonetheless becoming a lost one. Beware the mere glitter of charisma alone. In a politician, it is often no more than wrapping paper around a thin gift box of costume jewellery, but true orators can move mountains and nations.

It might even prove a propellant of winds for reform in otherwise seemingly hopeless political storms. This takes us to former US president Barack Obama's remarkable [keynote address](#) on [climate change](#) last week in Glasgow.

In thinking back on a life of listening to political figures making their pitches, few stand out even though the finest wines of historic oratory hit you quickly from first sip to last.

In my memory lives [Nelson Mandela](#), who to my ear deserves the lifetime achievement award for oratory. Then there are lesser-known figures such as the late Tory politician Iain Macleod, who packed a powerful British punch.

From Asia, the best oratory in English I ever heard came from Lee Kuan Yew, whose stylised Britishism never blurred his "[Asian values](#)" message. From America, Martin Luther King's aide Jesse Jackson – not to mention King himself – understood that only oratory that came from the heart as well as the mind could keep hope alive.

Then came Obama. The impact of effective oratory includes public persuasion to a new and important idea or core consolidation of a growing consensus over an existing one. Obama's Glasgow star turn was more of the latter. What was new was his fine-tuning to the ears of the young, as the oldest among us will not live to see the darkest days of the climate reckoning.

His insistence on paying greater attention to the demands of [young people traumatised](#) by their elders' climate inaction might not have ranked high in terms of innovation, but it struck a profound chord.

"Vote the issue. Vote like your life depends on it, because it does," he told the assembled delegates. "[But] don't think you can ignore politics ... You can't be too pure for it. It is part of the process that is going to deliver all of us."

The keynote speech roused the crowd to its feet and served to remind other major leaders [who stayed at home](#), including China and Russia's, that perhaps they should not have done so.

Great orators are almost incapable of delivering a ho-hum speech. While the gift of a golden tongue is rare, it can be oddly underrated, especially by the envious and less talented. I remember when Obama, then a US senator, was running for the presidency in 2008 and people said he was no more than a puffed-up hot air balloon.

But effective power can derive far more from bursts of persuasion than the barrel of a gun, and a political leader can hardly hope to gun down every idea with whom disagreement is rampant. Oratory can turn heads as well as change minds.

Having faced a [snarly and divided Congress](#), Obama's overall record hardly ranks as the greatest of all time. However, my instinct is that he will probably go down as the best president the American political system is likely to permit to rise to the top.

My pitch is that Obama, still relatively young at 60, should be drafted into the service of improving [US-China relations](#), and that Beijing should welcome the idea. Other than global climate policy, there is no more urgent and worthy a deployment of his talent.

America and China both need to explain their policies and intentions better than they have. Former Republican president George W. Bush could be similarly approached to join the cause. While he is no Cicero, he is a clear and forceful communicator.

Fortunately, the [video conference summit](#) between US President [Joe Biden](#) and President Xi Jinping, scheduled for Tuesday Beijing time, is not expected to require transcendent oratory. More common sense and mutual compromise would help both sides pull back from the perilous precipice.

The hard work of finding and consolidating common ground is crucial. Golden speech alone will hardly bring a new settled peace to East Asia, but something more is needed than what we have had so far. We need more music in our global relations and less muscle.

Obama might not be America's best negotiator, but he can still be one of the world's leading inspirers. He can speak to the issue of Beijing-Washington relations as a special citizen of the world.

This idea will strike some as absurd, but in fact it has urgency as well as agency. Beijing has begun its final preparations to host the Winter Olympics in February, but already there are [calls for a boycott](#) of the Games, and the bandwagon is gathering steam.

If this sad turn comes to pass, all Chinese people – not just the governing elite in Zhongnanhai – should be outraged. The [politicisation of the Olympics](#) is as dead-end and immature a gesture as politicisation of climate control. Idealism in the pursuit of justice, peace and sound policies has little efficacy if it is purely imitative of pathetic past gestures.

Our efforts right now, as Obama put it, need to “give our planet a fighting chance”. This is “a decisive decade” and “cynicism is the recourse of cowards”. Lend this voice your ears.

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