



## US-China I: Will A Dissident's Escape Disrupt It?

*Nicholas R. Lardy says that China and the Obama Administration seem successful in trying to prevent a blowup over Chen Guangcheng.*

*Transcript of interview recorded May 2, 2012. © Peterson Institute for International Economics.*

Steve Weisman: The Strategic and Economic Dialogue between China and the United States occurs the first week of May amid some turbulence over the recent escape of the blind Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng. Nicholas Lardy, Senior Fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics is here with me, Steve Weisman, to talk about the dialogue. He and others have just returned from a meeting between the Peterson Institute and Chinese economic and financial figures.

Nick, the headlines are focusing on Mr. Chen's escape and sanctuary under US custody. Is this episode in danger of disrupting whatever progress can be made in U.S. China relations?

Nicholas Lardy: I think from what we've seen so far the answer to that would have to be no. If the Chinese government had an initial response that was highly extreme, explosive, criticizing United States, or if the U.S. had made some extreme statements criticizing the Chinese government for their treatment of Mr. Chen, we could have easily been on a downward spiral. But so far, we've avoided that. I think it's very clear that each side is saying as little as possible about this case publicly. The diplomacy is at work. I think there's a reasonable chance it will be successful, but we won't know for sure until there are some final announcements. I think both sides are under some pressure to resolve this before the official talks get underway about 24 hours from now.

[Subsequent to this interview, U.S. officials announced that Mr. Chen would be allowed to apply for a visa to study in the United States.]

Steve Weisman: Is it possible that it could take months or longer to resolve definitively?

Nicholas Lardy: That's possible. Part of the question is what Mr. Chen really prefers himself. We've been told by people close to him that he does not want to ask for asylum in the United States, that he prefers to remain in China. I think he fears quite correctly, that if he were to leave China, any influence he would have on political and legal reform in China would be greatly diminished. So that's a quandary for him. Also there's the question of his family; it's not clear if he were given asylum and were able to go to the United States, whether his family would be able to accompany him.

If he's released and the Chinese government offers some assurance that his treatment will be improved, there's a question of how you monitor that or how you can be assured that that actually will come to pass. And of course that uncertainty puts the U.S. government in a difficult position. So there are a number of issues at play here and as you say, it could drag out a long time. If he wants asylum, of course, the Chinese can prevent him from leaving the embassy. Asylum is not normally granted to somebody who's in the country he's seeking asylum from, for the very reason that it's usually impossible to get the person out of the country. People usually seek asylum when they're abroad. So this is a very, very unusual case if

he were to ask for asylum. And if he were to ask for asylum and the U.S. were to grant it, he might be bottled up in the embassy for months or even longer, as has been the case (or was the case) with Fang Lizhi, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Crisis, more than a decade ago.

Steve Weisman: Another interesting aspect of this is that he was held under house arrest not by the national government, with which the Obama administration is negotiating, but by the local authorities. Is there some tension between local and Beijing authorities that makes the negotiating more complicated?

Nicholas Lardy: It's certainly complicated and I think the amazing thing is that Mr. Chen, as soon as he escaped, the very first thing he did was to create this video appealing to the Chinese Premier for a redress of the abuse to which he'd been subjected by local officials in the province where he lives, Shandong province. He served some prison time for the charges that have been brought against him earlier, which most people thought were trumped up. But then the local officials have been harassing him and keeping him in effect under house arrest and reportedly abusing members of his family, beatings and and so forth, almost certainly without the knowledge of the security and police authorities in Beijing.

This is a very, very common occurrence: local abuse of power in extralegal proceedings. So interestingly, he thinks if he appeals to the federal government he'll get some redress and perhaps in this case, he will. And it's a very common pattern for the Chinese, who have suffered at the hands of the local government; their land may be expropriated for a very low price or any other number of other unhappy things may have happened to them. But they retain confidence that if full information was known about their case to higher level officials, the situation could be rectified. That seems to be the basis on which Mr. Chen is proceeding.

By the way, one possibility is that the central government, recognizing its inability to guarantee any specific kind of treatment in the locality far from Beijing, might offer to let him live in Beijing with his family and lead a more normal life, and not be subject to these extralegal proceedings. It's important to recognize that Chen is not really a political dissident. He is trying to get the Chinese to enforce their own laws. He is seeking legal reform within the existing Chinese political system. He is not seeking a change in the political system. Of course, some people believe if you follow the laws more closely, it would lead ultimately to political reform. But he's not an out-and-out political reformer. He's more of a legal reformer.

Steve Weisman: So might there be some sympathy for him in Beijing?

Nicholas Lardy: There might be. I mean, there should be, because top political leaders in China have always called for the rule of law, and here they are with this case of Bo Xilai, where they're saying, "We're going to apply Chinese law, if this guy has violated Chinese law, he's going to be subject to a trial and he's going to be subject to some punishment decided by the court." So it's a little strange that there is some dissonance between what they're saying with respect to Mr. Bo, this First Party Secretary or Former First Party Secretary, former Politburo member, the highest or almost highest ruling group in China, who's going to be subject to legal proceedings, and Mr. Chen, [who] was being subject to extralegal proceedings. So they could certainly find a way to improve his situation that would be fully congruent with their announced principles. Of course there are always extralegal proceedings in China and many people do not get the kind of redress that they're hoping for.

Steve Weisman: Thank you, Nick. We'll have a second part of this interview on the dialogue shortly.

