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Hillary Clinton's Effort to Help Chen Guangcheng Turns Into a Debacle

Her effort to help the blind dissident blew up in Beijing. After a string of foreign-policy successes, the fiasco has put a dent in Clinton's halo—and handed Romney a campaign issue.

by [Howard Kurtz](#) | May 4, 2012 4:45 AM EDT

The situation was delicate from the start: a blind Chinese dissident holing up in the U.S. Embassy shortly before Hillary Clinton was to arrive for high-level talks.

What followed was anything but delicate, but rather a series of miscues and mishaps that left Chen Guangcheng's fate in doubt, Beijing authorities infuriated, and Clinton's mission in shambles—if indeed anyone could remember why she went there in the first place.

For Chen to tell The Daily Beast's Melinda Liu that he wanted to leave the country on the secretary of State's plane, not long after U.S. officials thought they had worked out the deal he wanted, was nothing short of an international embarrassment. Clinton, usually so steady on the world stage, tried to do a diplomatic dance and wound up tripping over her own feet.

The stumbling did more than place a tremendous strain on U.S.-Chinese relations. It stopped cold what had been a week of foreign-policy strutting by the Obama administration, from the one-year anniversary of Osama bin Laden's killing (trumpeted again in an hourlong NBC special) to the president's surprise visit to Afghanistan.

And just as Mitt Romney seemed at a loss over how to respond—he had to tone it down after saying “even Jimmy Carter” would have signed Osama's death warrant—the Republican candidate was handed a gift-wrapped foreign-policy present.

“If these reports are true,” Romney intoned, “this is a dark day for freedom and it's a day of shame for the Obama administration.”

On a personal level, the standoff halted a wave of positive press for the onetime first lady, who says she's stepping down at year's end. Her lighter public persona was highlighted when the president joked at last weekend's White House Correspondents' Dinner that she had been “drunk-texting me from Cartagena.”

Of course, Clinton is merely the most visible member of a State Department team that is supposed to quietly resolve disputes such as the Chen matter before she steps in to seal the deal. And the U.S. side may have been genuinely flummoxed by Chen's changes of mind.

Gary Locke, the former Washington State governor turned ambassador to Beijing, was made available to reporters to say that he asked Chen twice in the van departing the embassy whether he really wanted to leave, and both times the answer was yes.

The case was so sensitive, with Hillary's visit looming, that American officials refused for days to acknowledge that Chen was in fact being sheltered in the embassy. And the narrative seemed plucked from a 007 movie, with the blind activist escaping house arrest—though the Chinese regime had never filed charges against him—by feigning sickness, scaling a fence and, despite a wounded foot, being smuggled by allies 300 miles to the capital.

Both sides had an interest in defusing the high-stakes showdown. The Obama administration did not want to appear soft on human rights while its top envoy was participating in an economic summit, and Chinese leaders were anxious to avoid looking weak in the face of such a blatant challenge. Neither country wanted the standoff to blow up the visit.

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For a time, it seemed that Clinton would defuse the crisis. Chen, who gained fame by opposing China's policy of forced abortions and sterilization, indicated he did not want to seek asylum in America, the most obvious face-saving way out. After speaking to Chen by phone from a Beijing hospital where he was being treated, Clinton said: “I am pleased that we were able to facilitate Chen Guangcheng's stay and departure from the U.S. Embassy in a way that reflected his choices and our values.”

But American values appeared tarnished as whatever assurances the U.S. side believed it had won about Chen's treatment seemed to evaporate. He claims he agreed to leave the embassy because Chinese officials threatened to send his wife back to a remote village, perhaps to an uncertain fate.

By Thursday Chen was sobbing as he spoke by phone with The Daily Beast's Melinda Liu. “My fervent hope is that it would be possible for me and my family to leave for the U.S. on Hillary Clinton's plane,” he said. But Clinton no longer has the maneuvering room to obtain that outcome, if she ever did.

Chen did make a point of thanking Clinton for her help. But he told *The Washington Post* that the Chinese are not honoring the agreement and that he wants to come to the United States on a temporary basis.

Clinton's options would appear to be dwindling. The 40-year-old activist may simply be kept out of sight until the secretary flies home, giving Chinese authorities the ability to again place him under restrictive house arrest once the world spotlight fades. But China cracked open a door of compromise on Friday, saying Chen can "apply" to study in the U.S.

Whatever the denouement, Hillary Clinton will face growing criticism upon her return for mishandling the negotiations. And her boss, fresh off a triumphant trip to Afghanistan, will find that Romney and the Republicans determined to change the subject to China.