



Bush-Hu summit challenge: ease strategic distrust

by Bonnie Glaser

The presidents of China and the United States hold a summit next week at an important juncture in Sino-American relations. Even as Washington and Beijing have enhanced cooperation on critical security issues such as the war on terrorism and North Korea's nuclear weapons and established new dialogue mechanisms to address the growing complexity of their relationship, strategic distrust has persisted and in some ways has intensified.

Beijing suspects that the U.S. will attempt to slow or block China's rise to great power status. Washington's strengthening of ties with several of China's neighbors, including its ally Japan, as well as India and Vietnam, are perceived by Beijing as aimed at least in part at checking China. Chinese researchers view U.S. policies promoting democracy in Central Asia as aimed at destabilizing China's minority regions. Anxiety about U.S. policy toward Taiwan has abated, but could resurface if future shifts in Taiwan's domestic politics ease constraints on pro-independence supporters. Continuing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and the deepening U.S.-Taiwan defense relationship serve as proof to Beijing that the U.S. opposes reunification.

America's growing angst about China is even more profound. To some extent China has been a scapegoat. Americans wrongly blame the Chinese for taking away U.S. jobs and driving up the price of oil. CNOOC's bid to buy Unocal was ill-timed and poorly executed to be sure, but it was hardly a Chinese scheme to gain control of U.S. strategic assets, as some congressmen charged.

Underlying these accusations, however, is mounting uncertainty and anxiety about how China's rise will affect the U.S. – our standard of living at home and our interests abroad. Americans see China amassing greater economic, political, and military clout and are uncertain to what ends Beijing will use its growing influence and power. This uncertainty extends to the Bush administration, where officials question China's motives in its dealings with Sudan, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, Burma, Iran, and other regimes that Washington views as pursuing unsavory policies at home or abroad. China's military buildup is also unsettling and judged to be beyond that required by China's essentially benign strategic environment.

The U.S. and China began to address some of these strategic issues in the Senior Dialogue between Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick and Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo that was launched in early August. But the discussion of crucial questions such as how the U.S. and China view each other and their respective roles in the 21st century is too important to be delegated entirely to senior bureaucrats. U.S. and Chinese leaders should seize the

opportunity offered by their summit to engage in a candid conversation on these issues and find ways to allay each other's strategic mistrust.

Public speeches planned for delivery by China's president at Yale University and in Washington D.C. provide an occasion to reassure Americans about what kind of power China aspires to be. Hopefully, Hu will not dismiss the apprehensions of Americans about China's rise – which are shared by many other countries – as attempts to propagate the "China threat theory" as is often alleged in the Chinese media.

Doubts and uncertainty about China's policies as it ascends are understandable and Hu should acknowledge this. Moreover, he should go beyond a simple promise that Beijing will remain committed to peace and development. Rather, Hu should present his vision for China's future and its role in Asia and the world once great power status has been achieved. Specifically, Hu should explicate the concrete steps that Chinese leaders will take to avert disruption to the international system as occurred during the ascendance of Japan and Germany.

Boosting cooperation in areas where U.S. and Chinese interests overlap should also be a priority task of the summit. Both countries have a major stake in securing the peaceful dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear programs and should redouble their joint efforts to achieve that goal. Mindful of the dangers of Sino-U.S. strategic rivalry, Bush and Hu should seek to head off antagonistic competition in the energy sector and instead explore ways to advance shared Chinese and U.S. interests in keeping oil prices stable, ensuring the unhampered flow of oil and liquid natural gas through sea lanes, and developing new sources of energy for the future.

Failure to address head-on the growing suspicions that the U.S. and China have about each other's strategic intentions will be costly. The need for mutual strategic reassurance is pressing to avert continued drift toward an adversarial relationship in the decades to come.

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