

Hu Jintao's Visit: Opportunity to Reset the U.S.-China Relationship by Bonnie S. Glaser

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A lot of inaccurate information is being published about the Obama administration's China policy. US officials are generally disappointed that Beijing has not embraced President Obama's offer to elevate the US-China relationship through cooperation on global issues of consequence to both countries, but they have not retracted the proposal. Washington continues to try to work with China on a broad range of issues where our interests overlap. While there is concern about a pattern of more assertive Chinese rhetoric and behavior this past year, there has been no decision to forge an anti-China coalition in concert with China's neighbors.

US media reports about US policy toward China can lead to mistaken conclusions, however. *The Washington Times* reported (Oct. 21) that there is a policy dispute between two factions, the "kowtow" group that favors policies of conciliation and concessions in relations with China and another group that is "sad and disappointed" by Beijing's refusal to work cooperatively with the United States for the past two years. A few days later (Oct. 25) the *New York Times* reported that the Obama administration was "stiffening its approach toward Beijing" and seeking to shape coalitions to pressure China to change its unacceptable policies. Then the *Sankei Shimbun* claimed (Nov. 14) that the main purpose of President Obama's trip to Asia was to issue a warning to China.

It is fair to say that the US-China relationship has failed to meet the hopes and expectations of the United States from the president on down. Obama's team worked assiduously the first year in office to put the US-China relationship on solid footing, hoping to lay the groundwork for cooperation on major global challenges like coping with climate change, preventing nuclear nonproliferation, and building a new global economic order. Beijing proved unwilling to jointly tackle these problems. Moreover, the Chinese viewed the United States as weakened by the global financial crisis and concluded that the power gap between China and the US was rapidly narrowing.

A succession of events since early 2009 suggests that Beijing has been testing the hypothesis that the relative decline in US power and China's growing strength has provided Beijing with increased leverage. Although China denies an intention to directly challenge US interests, it has shown a willingness to more assertively defend what it sees as Chinese core national interests.

Evidence of China's growing assertiveness in areas linked to its core interests can be seen in its rhetoric and behavior in several instances:

- (1) *Chinese harassment of US ocean surveillance ships operating in China's exclusive economic zones in the South China Sea and Yellow Sea in the spring of 2009.* In a series of incidents, Chinese naval and patrol vessels engaged in dangerous maneuvers in an effort to impede the passage of the *USNS Impeccable* and the *USNS Victorious*. China denied US charges, dismissed US statements that there is no legal basis for restricting activities by other nations' naval vessels in a country's EEZ, and rejected US protests that Chinese actions violated the requirement under international law to operate with due regard for the rights and safety of other lawful users of the ocean.
- (2) *Beijing's harsh reaction to the January 2010 \$6.4 billion arms sales package to Taiwan.* In keeping with past practice, China suspended bilateral US-Chinese military exchanges, and planned dialogues on nonproliferation and international security. This time, however, China also threatened to impose sanctions on US companies that sell arms to Taiwan, although this was not enforced through legal measures. China also rebuffed a visit by the Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in June 2010.
- (3) *Chinese warnings in response to planned US-ROK joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan following the sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan.* Prior to an official announcement declaring the timing, location and participating ships in military drills in the waters off the Korean Peninsula, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman stated in July that "We firmly oppose foreign warships and military aircraft entering the Yellow Sea and other coastal waters of China to engage in activities affecting China's security and interests."
- (4) *Chinese response to US efforts to promote a multilateral process to ensure peace and stability in the South China Sea.* At the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi rebuffed Secretary Clinton's insistence that "The US has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea" and her call for settling rival territorial claims under international law, including the Convention on the Law of the Sea and "existing ASEAN principles." Staring at Singapore's foreign minister, George Yeo, Yang declared that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact."
- (5) *Chinese actions to slow the delivery of cargo being shipped from Chinese ports to Japan, including rare earths, after the Japanese arrested and detained the*

captain of a Chinese fishing vessel that was fishing in waters claimed by Japan near the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands. Although Beijing denied imposing an embargo on the export of rare earths to Japan, Chinese officials admitted reinforcing customs inspections, ostensibly to counter smuggling. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman rejected Secretary Clinton's statement to Japanese Foreign Minister Maehara that the islands fall within the scope of the US-Japan security treaty.

Developments this year should convince the Chinese that it would be unwise to underestimate US determination to remain the preeminent power in the Asia-Pacific region. And while the US economy will not recover in the near-term, it is likely to be resilient and remain a leading engine of global economic growth in the future.

It's time for Beijing to recalibrate its foreign policy and get back to meeting the challenge of acting as a responsible stakeholder, an offer first put on the table by the George W. Bush administration, though pursued even earlier by the Clinton administration. Last week in Jakarta, President Obama stated that the US seeks a prosperous and secure China and noted that "we're not interested in containing that process." He urged China to join the community of nations that operates within an international framework and a set of rules in which countries recognize their responsibilities.

Chinese President Hu Jintao's upcoming visit presents an opportunity to reset the US-China relationship. There is a pressing need to demonstrate the value of our bilateral ties to our respective elite and publics. Senior Director for Asian Affairs at the NSC Jeff Bader told the press in a briefing prior to Obama's departure for the region that the administration's approach to China is based on three pillars: 1) broadening areas of cooperation with China; 2) strengthening relationships with partners and allies to shape the context in which China's emergence is occurring; and 3) insisting that China abides by global norms and international law. The offer to have a partnership based on cooperation on global issues is still on the table. Beijing would be wise to seize it.