

Obama's recent China policy – more resolve, rising tension
by Robert Sutter

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Anticipated positive interaction between President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the nuclear summit in Washington on Mar. 31-Apr. 1 probably will not change Obama's more resolute approach to the challenges the Xi administration has posed to US interests. Rising tensions with China seem to be accepted in Washington as unavoidable consequences of the US need to protect important interests from negative Chinese practices.

President Obama and his administration for a long time have viewed China policy as a mix of positive goals sought by Americans along with adverse elements reflecting often protracted and deeply rooted differences with China. The US president and former Chinese President Hu Jintao (2003-2013) appeared to share common ground in emphasizing constructive engagement and avoiding serious problems with one another. Notably, both leaders were preoccupied with domestic and foreign problems elsewhere. In contrast, Xi has boldly taken initiatives that seek Chinese ambitions at others expense, notably the United States. In particular, Xi's China:

- Uses coercive means short of direct military force to advance Chinese control in East and South China Sea at the expense of neighbors' and US' interests in the regional order.
- Uses foreign exchange reserves and excess industrial capacity to launch self-serving international economic development programs and institutions that seek to undermine US leadership and/or exclude the US.
- Advances China's military buildup targeted at the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.
- Continues cyber theft of economic assets and intellectual property, market access and currency practices, and intensified repression and political control – all with serious adverse consequences for US interests.

President Obama rarely discussed in public the differences he had with China during his first six years in office. Presumably reflecting growing frustration with Chinese practices under Xi, he has become outspoken since 2014 about Chinese behavior on the above issues. Xi publicly ignored the complaints that were dismissed by lower-level officials. Xi emphasized a purported "new great power relationship" with

the US. American critics increasingly saw Xi playing a double game at US expense.

Since the strained US-China summit in Washington in Sept. 2015, Obama has had less to say publicly about China. Rather, he is taking stronger action. Salient examples include:

- Much stronger pressure to compel China to rein in rampant cyber theft of US property.
- Much stronger pressure to compel China to abide by international sanctions against North Korea.
- China's continued militarization of disputed South China Sea islands followed Xi's seemingly duplicitous promise made during the Sept. summit not to do so. In tandem came much more active US military deployments in the disputed South China Sea, along with blunt warnings by US military leaders of China's ambitions.
- More prominent cooperation with allies Japan, the Philippines, and Australia along with India and concerned Southeast Asian powers that strengthens regional states at odds with China over the South China Sea and creates webs of regional cooperation that complicate Chinese bullying.
- The abrupt decision in Mar. 2016 halting access to US information technology that seriously impacted China's leading state-directed electronics firm ZTE. Reportedly, ZTE had agreed under US pressure to halt unauthorized transfers to Iran of US-sourced technology and then created shell companies to continue the unauthorized transfers.
- The unprecedented US-led rebuke of negative Chinese human rights practices in a joint statement to the UN Human Rights Council in Mar. 2016 that was endorsed by Japan, Australia, and nine European countries.

Against this background, it is worth noting the so-called Taiwan issue in US-China relations, which has become more sensitive following the landslide election in Jan. of Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Tsai Ing-wen and a powerful majority of DPP legislators. In contrast with other recent actions noted above, the Obama government has avoided controversy with Beijing over Taiwan as Washington endeavors to sustain peace and stability through cross-strait dialogue.

How much trouble ahead?

Because the United States and China are big countries, they are not easily influenced by outside pressure. Xi's bold assertiveness has been warmly embraced by very self-righteous Chinese opinion that views Hu Jintao's discretion

with disdain. Thus, China's recent assertiveness seems likely to continue. The US too is known for its self-righteousness. All US presidential candidates who have spoken on China-related issues have adopted more hardline approaches than Obama. Thus, informed US officials seem correct when they advise privately that there will be greater "friction and tension" in the period ahead.

It's easy to exaggerate the impact of the rising US-China tension in 2016. Much worse friction showed as the two powers grappled with tensions over Taiwan beginning in 1995 that didn't subside appreciably until the election in 2008 of Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou, who was bent on accommodating Beijing. Indeed, the experience of that tension may help to explain the continued public restraint of the US government on the Taiwan issue. In sum, how much tension exists in the current period will depend on a complicated mix of circumstances including the resolve of the Obama and Xi governments, the outcome of the US presidential elections, and the salience in those elections of the ongoing US debate over China policy.

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