

Sunnylands: The Obama-Xi Summit by Stephen Noerper

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Presidents Barack Obama and Xi Jinping, G2 leaders, likely new pals, meet this week at Sunnylands. Aptly named, although not simply “east of LA” (as some reports have it), this sprawling desert retreat, the former Annenberg estate, sits two hours away in Rancho Mirage. Deserts loom large in our literary minds, from the Bible to Paul Bowles, and oft suggest blank space for exploration of the soul. It is here that the leaders of the dominant and ascendant world powers will stroll, each getting of the other – to borrow from a past presidential aside – “a sense of his soul.”

What is remarkable is that in the four decades since Nixon’s historic opening of China, the presidents of China and the United States have never entertained summitry of quite this type. Sunnylands is about atmospherics and tone, at a “critical juncture” in bilateral relations, according to Chinese press. The Beijing preliminaries have been remarkably good, with the US chair of the Joint Chiefs and the National Security Advisor received in serious, respectful, and pragmatic ways. Xi’s abandoning overstuffed chairs for a working table to dialogue with National Security Advisor Tom Donilon strikes a new tone worth noting – let’s put aside ceremonials and get some real work done.

This seems an apt fit for a US president with a reputation for less pomp and more circumstance. With Asia instincts (Hawaii, Jakarta) and hailing from Sandburg’s City of the Big Shoulders – Chicago – Obama has a natural inclination toward getting it right on China and getting things done. Xi “gets this” from his own Midwest sojourn (Iowa). But this is a unique type of summitry – one not about laundry lists or scores of commitments. The most important takeaway will be the comfort level of each toward the other and determination that Obama’s second term and Xi’s first see a pragmatic, results-oriented relationship where objectives are understood, even if differing or at times in conflict.

Do not be mistaken. There will be real progress, most notably on North Korea. China showed remarkable good faith in its stand with recent visitor DPRK Vice Marshall Choe Ryong-hae, to whom China touted a new line: denuclearization, akin to Obama, not simply stability, the convenient watchword of Xi’s predecessors. Despite North Korea’s official media take on the visit, Chinese media emphasized the differences between these Communist allies. Take this as a nod from Xi and his backers toward Sunnylands, as well as the meeting late June between Xi and South Korean President Park Geun-hye.

Obama and Xi will see progress on cooperation on regional relations, as well as climate change and denuclearization – priorities for this US administration. But do not expect breakthroughs on more problematic fronts, like cyber security, maritime, or trade; these are critical, but results will follow with the right atmospherics and enhanced communication in place.

Sunnylands has every potential to prove the most significant dialogue between the US and China in four decades. The terrain is good, the desert air fresh. U2’s breakout album *The Joshua Tree* took its name from a nearby landmark; *With or Without You* and *I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For* were hit singles. These two presidents – popular First Ladies alongside – may turn these titles on their heads.

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