



Bush-Hu summit: beyond formalities

by Ding Xinghao and Yu Bin

When the heads of state of the world's most powerful and most populous nations meet in Washington D.C., they will have to deal with a whole set of issues and problems that includes trade, energy, Korea, and Taiwan, among others. All are essential for normal bilateral relations. None, however, can be resolved to one's complete satisfaction. Nonetheless, the summit itself – the momentum of which will be picked up later this year when President Bush visits China – provides a vital opportunity for the two nations to adjust and cushion their closely intertwined and somewhat strained relations.

Behind Hu's "nonstate" official visit

Hu's first official visit to the U.S. as China's head of state is packed with normal summit goodies: a stopover in Seattle to see Boeing and Microsoft, a speech at Yale University, meetings with lawmakers and local officials. The chemistry leading to the summit, however, has been beset with a war of words regarding diplomatic protocol: would it be held at the dusty but more intimate Texas ranch as offered by the White House or would it be a formal "state visit" as insisted upon by Beijing with a full display of official ceremonies in Washington? At the end of the day, the White House offered the South Lawn treatment and the 21-gun salute customary for a head of state, while still calling it a mere "visit" without the term "state." President Hu, therefore, will be the first Chinese leader not to receive a "state visit" on his first visit.

Hu's U.S. trip will be further complicated in Seattle where the Chinese leader is expected to visit Boeing and Microsoft, two major U.S. corporations in the booming China market. Despite the fact that Hu will place a generous order for Boeing's products, the 18,300 employees of the world's largest airplane manufacturer may be on strike for the first time in 10 years. Meanwhile, the aircraft maker is facing civil charges for alleged violations of U.S. restrictions on the sale of military technologies to China dating back to 2000 and 2003.

These "skirmishes" in the runup to the summit, deliberate or not, occur against the backdrop of a chorus of China bashing in the U.S. capital regarding China's alleged "misbehavior" on trade, currency manipulation, a surging energy appetite, human rights abuses, a military buildup, exercises with Russia, excluding the U.S. from Central Asia, "intrusions" into the U.S. "backyard"; the list goes on. Clearly, the "best ever relationship" that former Secretary of State Colin Powell described before he left office is over. The current tension in bilateral relations is occurring at the beginning of Bush's second term, thus defying the normal "China debate cycle" of election time and first terms.

China's rise and implications

To what extent these U.S. complaints reflect reality remains to be seen. In actuality, Beijing has worked hard to "soft-land" the Korean nuclear crisis, appreciate its currency, and soft-peddle relations with Taiwan. There is no question that the Bush administration has attached great importance to relations with China. Twice in 2005, Presidents Bush and Hu have met at the sidelines of multilateral gatherings (May in Moscow and June in Scotland). Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, too, has twice visited China this year. In early August, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick and his Chinese counterpart Dai Bingguo held the first ever "strategic dialogue (or "senior dialogue" according to Washington) in Beijing.

At a more strategic level, however, the anxiety and discomfort on the U.S. part may be understandable given the fact that China's rise has been almost unstoppable and has had ripple effects worldwide in trade, energy, investment, raw materials, tourism, diplomatic activities, and political influence. China's military power, too, will increase correspondingly, with or without the Taiwan factor.

Mindful of historical cases of disruptive effects created by the rapid rise of Germany and Japan, Beijing has repeatedly assured the world, and the U.S., that its rise will be in peace, by peace, and for peace. China will work with, not challenge, the U.S.-dominated international system. Neighboring states and the rest of the world will benefit from, and not be threatened by, China's rise. So far, China's rhetoric and behavior have largely converged. As a result, China, despite the authoritarian nature of its domestic politics, is viewed around the world more favorably than the U.S., according to a survey by the U.S.-based Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in June 2005. Everything else being equal, co-existing with China – a non-Western, non-Christian, nondemocratic nation, not once under U.S. jurisdiction (unlike Japan and Germany), and with independent foreign/defense policies – is a major psychological challenge for the world's sole superpower.

Hu's goal in the U.S.

Relations between the U.S. and a nation like China are, therefore, "complex," as both President Bush and Secretary Rice have said in recent references to U.S.-China relations. This belated conclusion on the U.S. part is similar to China's long-held view, made by former President Jiang Zemin in 2001, that the Sino-U.S. relationship is complex with elements of both competition and cooperation.

With the convergence of assessments regarding the nature of bilateral relations, Hu's mission in his U.S. visit is to stabilize ties with the most powerful nation on earth, for the interests of both China and the world. For this purpose, Hu

will utilize the summit to construct a more stable and amicable working relationship with President Bush. While specific issues such as trade, Korea, and Taiwan, are essential ingredients for a “looks good and tastes good” summit and therefore will be dealt with to some degree, sufficient understanding and mutual trust at the highest levels of leadership in the two nations are needed for the years ahead.

Hu and his top advisors have no illusion about achieving another “honeymoon” with the U.S. since no honeymoon lasts forever. Nor will President Bush be able to see into the soul of his Chinese counterpart. A lasting, or normal, relationship mixed with cooperation and competition, requires sustained efforts from both sides to understand and accommodate each other’s interests. This is the only way to avoid a “divorce,” which is relatively easy to obtain. Gaining understanding and building trust takes time, and it can be routine and boring. The alternative, however, is simply unthinkable in an era of weapons of mass destruction.

Hu’s job in the U.S. is by no means solely driven by national interest and cool-headed calculation. The vast society Hu presides over has a huge reservoir of goodwill toward the U.S. Aside from the lasting memories of America’s sacrifices and contributions to China’s war against Japan in the past, the Chinese enjoy things made in America and cannot get enough of them. Many continue to view America’s political system as a model for China, despite their disagreements with some U.S. foreign policies. Average Chinese would like to see progress in bilateral relations from the Bush-Hu summit this time so that they will continue to trade with, visit, study in, and dream about America. And they will be more than glad to reciprocate with Americans regarding China.

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