



Hu's Not Coming to Dinner, but ...

by Ding Xinghao and Yu Bin

In his first official visit to Washington D.C. on April 20, Chinese President Hu Jintao is not coming to a White House dinner. Nor is the Bush-Hu summit expected to yield any breakthrough in many areas of the closely intertwined but somewhat strained bilateral relationship. Thirty-five years after the “ping pong diplomacy” that led to Richard Nixon’s path-breaking 1972 visit to China, the official visit of China’s fourth-generation leader is perhaps among the least anticipated in U.S.-China relations.

Washington’s summit fatigue

There has been since 2005 “summit fatigue” with China, due largely to the perceived lack of progress in many bilateral and regional issues between Washington and Beijing. The disputes regarding President Hu’s postponed visit last September were so pernicious that it was a relief for both sides when Hurricane Katrina “conveniently” blew it away. Seven months later, the White House still calls Hu’s trip a mere “visit” without using the term “state.” President Hu, therefore, will be the first Chinese leader not to receive a “state visit” – or a White House dinner – on his first official visit.

Washington’s mood is a sharp contrast to surging pro-U.S. sentiment in China. A recent public opinion poll in China’s five largest cities shows nearly 80 percent of the Chinese are “satisfied” with Sino-U.S. relations, an increase of 9 percent from a year ago. And 79 percent of respondents say they “like” Americans, a jump of 13 percent. U.S. pessimism is also at odds with some recent gains in bilateral relations. Donald Rumsfeld, a long-time hawk within the Bush team for a tougher China policy, made his first visit to China as secretary of defense in October 2005. His visit to the headquarters of the PLA’s strategic missile forces was unprecedented, considering that China has not even opened it to the defense minister of Russia, a strategic partner of Beijing for 10 years. President Bush himself was in Beijing a month later for his third official visit. In between, the talk of China as a “stakeholder” in the U.S.-led world system, an idea developed by Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick last September, seems to have redirected the bilateral relationship away from drift toward uncertainty and anxiety.

Washington is not just uninterested about relations with Beijing. In U.S. thinking, U.S.-China relations have moved away from Colin Powell’s “best-ever” paradigm in the post-9/11 years and toward a more ambiguous “complex” mode under Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In its 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)* released in February, the Pentagon defined China as having “the greatest potential to compete with the United States militarily.” Bush’s India visit last month is seen not only as unambiguous hedging against

China, but also a step toward the demise of an imperfect but still “right” nonproliferation regime. U.S. policies are either “too soft” for its friends and allies, and “too hard” for others, even for peaceful use. Finally, Secretary of State Rice’s recent tour of Southeast Asia revved up the China threat theme. Thus, the secretary of state pursues a rather black-and-white, rather than a “yin-and-yang,” or more nuanced, China policy. All this is happening at the time of an anticipated unprecedented relocation of U.S. strategic platforms (nuclear submarines, long-range bombers, aircraft carriers, etc.) to the Pacific and the hardening of the alliance with Japan. Washington’s “complex” mode for relations with China, therefore, clearly leans toward a more muscular approach based on military alliances to deal with, ironically, China’s growing influence that is largely based on its soft power such as diplomacy, commerce, and culture.

Hu’s goal: beyond economics

Hu’s visit is by no means just a shopping spree, though he is more than willing to work with Bush on issues of intellectual property rights, trade deficits, and energy cooperation. Meeting at the highest level, however, is pertinent and timely for at least three additional reasons. Strategic distrust is perhaps at the bottom of much of the U.S. redefinition of relations with China as “complex.” Hu therefore will reaffirm China’s intention to work with the U.S. for the stability of the world system. While Beijing understands the anxiety about a rising China, this concern is derived from the West’s own experience of rising powers destabilizing the international system in the past few centuries. This ignores a steady trend in the past 30 years: the rise, or re-emergence, of China has been by peaceful means and for peaceful goals. Hu would also like to see that the U.S. side reciprocates China’s “stakeholding” behavior with an open mind, pragmatism, and flexibility. This is not only for U.S. interests, but also for the security, stability, and even survivability of the world.

While the Hu-Bush summit will focus on bilateral issues, both sides will be keenly aware of the dynamics, development, and even danger in Northeast Asia. Here history has by no means “ended.” The future, however, is at stake not only because of the ongoing Korean nuclear issue, but also because of an emerging regional order defined by a steadily modernizing China as a leading trading state and a powerful Japan on the fast track back to “normal” after 60 years of being a reluctant “pacifist” state. There is nothing wrong with Japan emerging from the shadow of history. A radical switch from a pacifist to a provocative posture with a minimal and a distorted sense of the past, however, eerily recalls the first half of the 20th century when Japan was “normal.” As a Pacific power, the U.S. has strong interests in a stable and prosperous region. It will be able to maintain an effective leadership role only if its policies are comprehensive, balanced, and less

biased. The alternative is simply unthinkable in the era of preemption and weapons of mass destruction.

2005 was a quiet year for cross-Strait relations. The Taiwan issue, however, returned early this year when Chen Shui-bian scrapped Taiwan's National Unification Council and National Unification Guidelines – two symbolic elements of the island's lip-service to the one-China posture. He broke his promise five years ago not to eliminate them. There are still, in the next two years, four more “shoes” – no declaration of independence, no change of Taiwan's legal name to something other than the Republic of China, no rewriting of the constitution to make Taiwan a separate state, and no referendum on independence – that can drop. At stake is not only cross-Strait, but also cross-Pacific, relations.

Given the nature of these issues, the Bush-Hu summit is of strategic importance by itself, regardless of the formalities. A stable and prosperous Asia-Pacific for Bush's last two years in office will be a plus for the administration, no matter what else is up in the air.

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