



## **Not Too Fast with China**

by Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder

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BEIJING – With President Barack Obama making his first trip to China, it is vital that the two countries have a clear understanding of what they expect from each other. Failure to reconcile expectations could derail a partnership that is increasingly critical to the management of pressing global issues.

Recent discussions here with foreign policy and security analysts reveal a basis for cooperation: Chinese and American strategists share concerns and focus on the same problems. Yet, probe deeper and divergences quickly emerge. For example, while both countries agree that North Korea's nuclear ambitions undermine regional peace and stability, the precise nature of that threat differs: Chinese worry about instability emanating from the Korean Peninsula that could damage development plans; Americans fear nuclear proliferation and a threat to their allies in Northeast Asia.

In our discussions, Chinese strategists attributed each problem – be it North Korea, Iran, or South Asia – to that particular country's desire to create a new relationship with the U.S. Consequently, it was the U.S. that had the chief responsibility to fix each situation. China had little or no role to play. And when China could contribute, its influence was invariably limited. The North Korean example was illustrative: China's job was to create a venue where the two sides could talk.

This reluctance to shoulder more international responsibilities has several roots. The first is Deng Xiaoping's admonition that China "should adopt a low profile and never take the lead." Despite China's meteoric rise to become the world's third largest economy, that mentality prevails. Chinese Ambassador to the UK Fu Ying has written that "there is a long way to go for China to reach the level of world power. It may be destined to contribute more to world peace and development – as many in the West are calling for – but this will be an incremental process, and China can't play a role in the world beyond its capacity."

This reluctance to step up is more than a desire to avoid responsibility and maintain freedom to maneuver on tough issues. And it is more than the fact that China's domestic challenges are more overwhelming when viewed from Zhongnanhai than as seen from the outside. It also stems from a different conception of international leadership.

This divergence in U.S. and Chinese views was evident in a recent Pacific Forum CSIS survey of Chinese elites from a range of institutions. They take great pride in China's rising international stature and accomplishments – especially in China's successful economic development.

But in their responses, these Chinese elites seemed to show little sense of international responsibility or desire for global leadership. Almost all of them believe that China should be active internationally, but when asked what role their country could play, over 70 percent thought China's greatest contribution would simply flow from securing China's own stability and development.

Chinese respondents overwhelmingly rejected suggestions for how Beijing might take on larger international leadership roles. Over 90 percent rejected an international leadership role for China, and two-thirds rejected the idea that China should take a special role in resolving international disputes. Our respondents even hesitated to endorse a leadership role for China in Asia. While agreeing that China has a positive regional economic influence, 95 percent claimed that China is not ready to take a regional leadership role. And over 80 percent rejected the idea that China might take leadership in promoting regional security.

In discussions designed to flesh out those findings, we heard great pride in the status derived from China's growing power – and an insistence on China's right to assert itself on specific issues – but no explanation of how their country might use its power and influence beyond pursuit of narrowly-defined national interests. It is an item of faith among Chinese, however, that the principles their country defended would benefit the international system as a whole.

Differences between the United States and China over leadership were evident at the inaugural meeting of the S&ED in July. Despite the predictably positive tone, the discussions didn't deliver much. The United States and China have a shared interest in jumpstarting global economic growth, but China's economic stimulus efforts have – understandably – focused on domestic stability. Beijing complains about the dollar's status as a reserve currency, but is unwilling to loosen its grip on the RMB, fearing that would weaken its policy-making tools and undermine the value of its dollar holdings.

Or consider climate change. China is willing to promote the adoption of energy-efficient technologies from the United States and Japan – on preferable terms, but is unlikely to commit to hard targets for reductions in its own emissions to meet global targets in advance of the global climate change summit this December in Copenhagen. Beijing argues that it should not pay to solve a problem not of its making. True enough, but that is not the stuff of strong leadership.

Then there is China's support for a UN Security Council resolution in response to North Korea's recent nuclear test. Beijing didn't block the resolution, but its willingness to implement it is unclear, especially if it risks creating instability in North Korea. China's own interests in regional stability remain a higher priority than denuclearization, despite the global interest in stopping nuclear proliferation. Premier Wen Jiabao's recent visit to Pyongyang may have helped nudge North Korea back to the negotiating table, but there are questions whether the economic package he promised is consistent with the UN resolution. Moreover, there is speculation that he was spurred by fears that the U.S. might resume talks with North Korea and China would have to play catch-up.

In each of these cases, Beijing and Washington agree on the problem, but not the solution. And in each case, Beijing's bottom line is an unwillingness to spend political (or actual) capital in pursuit of public goods – international economic stability, fighting climate change, or strengthening the global nonproliferation regime. Failure to recognize this basic fact and scale back U.S. expectations of China will produce a collision between two countries that are essential to the solution of global and regional problems.