

## **US-China: A Narrowing Window for Obama?**

by Pier Luigi Zanatta

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The first decade of the 21st century has concluded on an eerie note in US-China relations: a missed confrontation on the Korean issue. A spate of border incidents between the North and South Korea has reminded Washington, Beijing, and the rest of the world that, even in the era of globalization, real peace can be far more elusive than we might think.

It seems clear that war has been averted because China decided to muzzle the North Korean bulldog after Washington drew a line in the sand. But global peace can't rest on such trivial solutions, especially in the Far East, where China's economic growth is changing geopolitical assumptions.

This change was recognized by President Obama when hosting Chinese President Hu Jintao last month. But this visit only partially reassured Washington about its capability to engage Beijing in sharing US feelings on how China should accept a new level of responsibility in Asian and world affairs.

In such a context it would be badly mistaken for US policy to lack vision and to keep on dealing only with specific problems, like the recurring provocations by North Korea or the development of its nuclear and missile programs (which were grossly underestimated by the Bush administration).

To avoid such mistakes, the first concern of the US in the Far East should be to engage China and Russia in finding a comprehensive solution to historical problems left over from World War II. This is a difficult but not impossible task with the help of the UN and of America's allies like Japan and South Korea, who may feel elated by a new kind of "texture" for the US presence and mission in the region.

Local political conditions seem favorable to a global initiative: the new leadership in Tokyo and old leaders in Moscow and in Beijing (the UN secretary general too, being a respected South Korean personality). President Hu and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao could be enticed with such prospects before the end of their terms in office. But Obama should be quick to act, since it can't be taken for granted that Hu's apparent successor Xi Jinping would share the same openness.

In fact, Xi's designation could reflect a sort of alternation in power between two political factions within the Chinese Communist Party. In different periods each faction has suffered under Mao Zedong's sway and both were chastised and humiliated during the Cultural Revolution. It's not difficult to understand why they have a sort of "gentleman's

agreement" forged by history and a similar distrust of internal turmoil. But Xi's political background is quite different from Hu's.

At the beginning of his militancy in the 1930s, Xi's father Xi Zhongxun was the righthand man of Gao Gang, a close associate of Mao. Later the "Great Helmsman" came to distrust both Gao and Xi as representatives of a sort of "Russian faction" that was repeatedly bashed by Mao himself, first in the '50s (just before the Korean War), then in the early '60s, and again at the end of the decade during the Cultural Revolution.

Every time, old Xi managed to survive and to re-emerge, mainly because of the experience he had gained in the effort to build the first industrial base of the country in Manchuria. To avoid any misunderstanding when he was rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping sent him south, where he was very successful in establishing in Shenzhen the first development zone that opened up to capitalism and set the pace for the Chinese economic miracle. Still, while taking advantage of the natural southerners' inclination for private initiative, Xi (like the whole Chinese leadership) never recanted the communist and Confucian principle of state control over the economy. Nor is it unthinkable that till his death in 2002 Xi kept good memories of his early "Russian days" in association with Gao.

It seems reasonable then that the future Chinese president has been imbued with Russian culture: in any case his "foreign imprint" looks quite different from leaders like Deng or Zhou Enlai (who in their youth lived in Paris and had a natural tendency to look West) or even Hu Yaobang (who as a young cadre was wronged and persecuted almost to death by the "Russian faction" within the CCP).

It should also be noted that Xi Jinping's wife, the beautiful former actress Peng Liyuan, was born in the same town as Mao's wife Jiang Qing (who was an actress herself). Curiously, Xi's daughter is a student at Harvard like the son of Bo Xilai, another Chinese leader whose father had strong Manchurian connections.

All this doesn't mean that the future Chinese president will be wholeheartedly pro-Russian. Still he might be much less pro-US than Hu Jintao (who has a different background, since he came to power as a protégé of the passionately anti-Russian Hu Yaobang). It's obvious too that China's interests are always the first and paramount priority for Chinese leaders, far beyond their personal feelings and leanings.

Still, as the new leader of such a big nation in 2012, Xi may need time to consolidate his internal power and to share a vision in foreign policy: therefore it could be quite important for the US administration to hammer out as soon as possible a new comprehensive approach to political problems in the Far

East to engage the Chinese leadership in a far-reaching peace plan before the enthroning of the new president next year.

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