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Obama must pursue new relationship with China

By Stephen A. Orlins

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When our grandchildren look back at the Obama administration's foreign policy, they will measure its success by the success of our relationship with China. No international relationship will have greater impact on the 21st century. What does this mean, though, in terms of what the president-elect should do immediately? My advice to President-elect Obama is simple: Go early and go often.

Obama needs to go early because this will help to dispel the strategic mistrust that exists between the U.S. and China, mistrust that is the single greatest impediment to solving the problems confronting our two great nations, and the world at large. January 1 is the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations and will be a day to consider the extraordinary changes in our relations with China and within China itself.

And he must go often, because this new cooperative phase in U.S.-China relations will allow us to deal more effectively with the global economic crisis, climate change, energy security, pollution, pandemics, terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and WMD, not to mention threats such as North Korea and Iran.

The distrust that still colors U.S.-China relations comes from decades during which the threat of military confrontation over Taiwan loomed large. But times have changed.

When I was a student there 36 years ago, Taiwan faced a different mainland China across the Strait, and China faced a different Taiwan. In March the people of Taiwan elected a president committed to closer association with China and set in motion forces that are promoting further economic and social integration. The Chinese government is implementing policies that will lead to reconciliation with the people of Taiwan. America's policy in the region has not, however, adapted to this new reality.

Obama can change this. On his first trip to China, Obama should say unequivocally, and directly to the Chinese people, that the United States supports a peace agreement between mainland China and Taiwan, and that closer relations between the two are in the best interests of the United States. This would fundamentally alter China's perception of America and allow for progress on numerous fronts. The new atmosphere would allow for productive discussions on

human rights, the successor treaty to the Kyoto accords, reduction of non-tariff trade barriers, increasing China's imports, participation in the international stabilization fund and most importantly how we jointly confront the international financial crisis.

Low-hanging fruit for such a visit would be commitments from China to purchase Westinghouse AP 1000 reactors for more of China's 24 nuclear power plants on the drawing board (currently they have contracted for four) and to engage in joint initiatives in clean coal technology and renewable energy. All of these have the added advantage of generating the kinds of jobs we want in America. (Sale of each reactor generates thousands of high paying jobs in the U.S., including thousands in western Pennsylvania.) Reduced mistrust will create new transparency from China's military planners and improved military to military contacts and China's participation in the 1,000-ship navy could begin to be discussed.

While the Chinese leadership is infinitely more responsive to the will of the Chinese people than when I first went to China 30 years ago, power still resides in the nine-member Politburo. The head of the Chinese Communist Party is the most powerful. The relationship that Obama develops with President Hu (who remains in office until 2012) during these bilateral visits, G8 meetings and other gatherings will influence the path that China takes, improve U.S.-China relations, and determine the world we leave to our children. Thirty years ago, I sat in the State Department working on the establishment of diplomatic relations with China. None of us imagined that U.S.-China relations would develop the way that they have or that China would lift hundreds of millions out of poverty and give its people choices they never had in the 1970s. Obama has already become the kind of leader many Americans have been waiting for, someone who reminds us to ask the big questions. Robert Kennedy was fond of quoting George Bernard Shaw: "Some see things as they are and ask why; I dream things that never were and ask why not."

With a new leader here at home, we are ready to dream something new for America's role in the world. We are beginning to believe again that we can create something new in our country — and in our relationship with China.

The Chinese people and the Chinese leadership eagerly await an American president who knows that the 21st century requires a changed relationship with China, and who will embrace the opportunities that will bring.

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