

Navigating China: Ten Months On, and a Lot to Show for It

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Last December I offered then President-elect Obama advice on how to start his administration's relationship with China on the right foot. I advised that he should go early and often.

Over its first ten months the Obama administration has skillfully improved U.S.-China relations and is establishing a framework which will allow these two nations to try and resolve the myriad problems confronting them both. President Obama seems to have understood that future generations will judge his foreign policy legacy on his skill and success in dealing with China.

My first recommendation was for President Obama to go early, and on this front he scores well. On Monday he arrives in China, less than 10 months after assuming the presidency, the earliest in his term that a sitting American president has ever traveled to China.

Mr. Obama's trip will build on the time the president has already had with President Hu Jintao at the G-20 summits in London and Pittsburg, as well as at a September meeting between the leaders in New York. Face-to-face meetings help build the kind of mutual understanding that is crucial to resolving the crises both countries confront. The visit will also allow our President to meet with a broad range of China's senior leaders in Shanghai and in Beijing and witness firsthand the extraordinary economic development that China is experiencing.

My suggestions for what ought to be on Mr. Obama's agenda in China have not changed since last December. In order to dispel the strategic mistrust that has hindered constructive engagement in the past, Mr. Obama should make clear that the U.S. endorses a peace agreement between mainland China and Taiwan. With a government in Taipei committed to close relations with the mainland--and virtually none of the belligerent tensions that prevailed when I was a student in Taipei 37 years ago--the President needs to directly, and on Chinese soil, dispel the notion that the US opposes closer relations between Taiwan and the mainland.

I continue to be optimistic that close, frequent contact between American and Chinese leaders will add muscle to the kinds of cooperative agreements that are necessary to tackle major issues like climate change, energy security, the economic crisis, and nuclear non-proliferation. I applaud the early trips to China by Secretaries Clinton (earliest ever by a Secretary of State), Geithner, Locke, and Vilsack to meet with their Chinese counterparts. Visits to the U.S. by NPC Chairman Wu Bangguo, Vice-Premier Wang

Qishan, State Councilor Dai Bingguo, and others have been equally well received. Expansion of the Strategic Economic Dialogue to include the Secretary of State and, on China's part, the State Councilor in charge of international relations, recognized the fact that the economic and strategic aspects of the relationship are inseparable and should be discussed at the cabinet level.

Even the stumbles and potential pitfalls have been well handled, and have not stalled cooperation on the grander scale. The May incidents between U.S. intelligence ships and Chinese vessels in the South China Sea could have easily spiraled out of control but were contained. The tariff on Chinese tires approved by the White House in September threatened to stoke a trade war between the two countries. Rather, in a show of maturity and integration into the global community, China responded by placing a formal appeal to the WTO to review the decision. Additionally, potential flashpoints like anti-dumping measures imposed on Chinese steel pipes by the Commerce Department, the WTO finding that Beijing must ease restrictions on imported movies, and decisions surrounding swine flu such as banning US exports of pork to China in the past could have derailed the relationship but today are handled as disputes among partners .

To continue the success of this administration's China policy, I would suggest the following priorities for Mr. Obama's trip. Prior to the Copenhagen Conference on climate change, both countries should make specific, attainable commitments to cutting carbon emissions. They should agree to share technology that relates to clean energy. The US should ease export restrictions on dual use items to China and China should remove local content requirements in this field as well as create a transparent tender process that allows non-Chinese companies to win bids. In the military-to-military arena, the political leadership of both sides needs to stress the importance of greater transparency in their dealings. More exchanges and education can only lead to better understanding. Because it is in China's interest to demonstrate that the use of force is unlikely, the PLA should unilaterally begin to reduce its troop and missile deployments in Fujian across from Taiwan; an action certain to increase strategic assurance.

As for my second piece of advice, that President Obama go to China often, time will tell whether he takes this to heart. I hope that at the end of our president's trip, the U.S. and China announce a trip by President Hu to Washington in the spring and a commitment to have summits among our two presidents at least annually. We cannot hope to deal with the problems of global warming, terrorism, proliferation, rogue states, financial stability, and rebalancing the world economies separately; while together we can at least make progress on all of these issues.