

## **China leader-in-waiting Xi to visit White House next month**

**Reuters**

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WASHINGTON, Jan 24 — President Barack Obama will host China's likely next leader, Vice President Xi Jinping, at the White House on February 14, in a visit set to boost Xi's credentials as the man who will steer Beijing's close but quarrelsome ties with Washington.

Obama and Xi will discuss "a broad range of bilateral, regional, and global issues," the White House said in a statement yesterday announcing the visit, when Xi will be hosted by Vice President Joe Biden.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry has yet to confirm the date of the visit; it had no immediate comment today, and did not answer faxed questions. This week is the Lunar New Year public holiday in China.

The two sides will have plenty of strains to talk about, especially over trade, human rights, North Korea and Iran. Above all, the Obama administration will keen for clues about Xi's worldview and how he intends to handle these thorny issues.

"The man Biden's hosting, barring something no one foresees at this point, will become the head of China, head of the Communist Party, head of the government and head of the military," said China expert Kenneth Lieberthal of the Brookings Institution in Washington.

"This is really a chance for the Obama administration to look forward to the succession and post-succession period in China and begin to establish critical personal relationships and a personal comfort level back and forth."

For Xi, the visit will be a valuable trophy that helps advertise his readiness for the top job.

His growing prominence indicates that he is virtually certain to replace Hu Jintao as Communist Party chief in late 2012 and then replace him as state president in early 2013.

The two powers have delicate issues to work through, ranging from currency policy to differences over how to halt the nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea, to China's recent crackdown on critics and activists that has drawn US criticism.

Beijing has voiced misgivings about Obama's plans to beef up the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific region and remains unhappy about US arms sales to Taiwan, the self-ruled island that China calls an illegitimate breakaway province.

China, Iran's biggest oil customer, also bristles at US efforts to tighten sanctions on that country in order to halt Tehran's nuclear ambitions. Beijing recently rebuffed a US official's call to cut back oil purchases from Iran.

While the United States is in an election year that has seen Republican candidates fire harsh rhetoric at China, Beijing will this year begin the power transfer that will see Xi and other officials take over as President Hu and his generation retire.

Obama, facing a tough re-election in November, is expected to renew his call for China to allow its yuan currency to appreciate during his State of the Union address today, as he highlights US exports among his proposals to boost jobs.

In an interview in Time magazine last week, Obama said US-China friction arose because China "sees itself as a developing or even poor country that should be able to pursue mercantilist policies that are for their benefit and where the rules applying to them shouldn't be the same rules that apply to the United States or Europe or other major powers."

Xi sets upbeat tone

Xi, 58, is the son of the late, reformist vice premier Xi Zhongxun, making him a "princeling": one of the privileged offspring of China's leaders who rose to power under Mao Zedong. He rose through the party ranks in coastal provinces.

Xi's family background and coming of age in the turmoil of Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-76) have prompted some observers to suggest he could take a harder line against Washington, which would also reflect growing nationalist sentiment in China.

But in a speech last week, Xi stressed Beijing's desire for steady relations and tried to set an upbeat tone for his visit.

"In dealing with major and sensitive issues that concern each side's core interests, we must certainly abide by a spirit of mutual respect and handle them prudently, and by no means can we let relations again suffer major interference and ructions," he told a meeting in Beijing.

Regardless of the international situation, he said, "our commitment to developing the Sino-US cooperative partnership should never waver in the face of passing developments".

Xi will probably be looking to set a "pragmatic but frank" tone for ties with Washington, said Zhang Musheng, a former Chinese central government official who has met Xi and other rising officials and written widely about their challenges.

"I don't feel that they're hardline in their views," Zhang told Reuters of China's emerging leaders, including Xi.

"It will still be the same basic approach of seeking steady, predictable relations (with the US)," added Zhang.

"But as China develops economically, it's attracting more criticism and suspicion, and there's a sense that we need to get used to putting our own views without creating alarm or conflict. That's not hardline; it's practical and realistic."

In August, Xi hosted Biden on a visit that gave Washington policymakers a chance to size up China's president-in-waiting.

Xi is also set to travel to Iowa and California, states keen to boost already fast-growing trade and to court investment. Dates have not formally been announced for those stops.

Xi's first known visit to the United States was to Iowa in 1985 as a junior official in the northern province of Hebei, which has a sister state/province relationship with Iowa.

Iowa governor Terry Branstad said his state would “make the most of our time with Vice President Xi”. — Reuters

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