

China's leader-in-waiting carries heavy political baggage to US
Reuters
February 08, 2012

BEIJING, Feb 8 — A Communist "princeling" fond of small town America and Hollywood war dramas, and brusque critic of Western pressure with a daughter at Harvard, Chinese leader-in-waiting Xi Jinping embodies his nation's contradictory ties with the United States.

Vice President Xi's visit to the United States next week will enhance his aura of readiness to lead China from late this year. It could also set the mood for the next decade that he is likely to serve as president, an era when Sino-US relations face deep and potentially troublesome shifts.

"I think this is an incredibly important trip, because this is the last time he's going to have the run of the pen without so much protocol confining him," said Orville Schell, director of the Centre on US-China Relations at the Asia Society in New York.

Both sides want Xi's visit to encourage longer-term cooperation between the world's two biggest economies, not immediate breakthroughs.

He appears curious to understand the ways of Washington and woo audiences outside the US capital. In China's one-party state, Xi need not worry about winning the vote of citizens, but he looks eager to try to win over American voters worried about China's strength and intentions.

His planned stop in Iowa, where he stayed briefly with a family in the small town of Muscatine in 1985, will reinforce that theme.

"In all likelihood, he's going to be running China for the next 10 years and it will be the first impression he gives to the (US) public at large prior to his assuming the presidency," said Stephen Orlins, president of the National Committee on United States-China Relations.

But the Chinese leader-in-waiting, aware of scrutiny at home, will want to avoid looking unduly keen to please the White House, said Jeffrey Wasserstrom, a historian of China at the University of California, Irvine.

Xi (pronounced like "shee") and his US hosts have many strains to deal with: bilateral disputes on trade and human rights, and policy disagreements over North Korea, Iran and most recently Syria, over which China blocked a U.N. resolution.

"Xi Jinping, as he's solidifying his position as the presumptive heir, as a relatively cosmopolitan figure within the Chinese establishment, may have to show that he's not going to be too easy on the West," said Wasserstrom.

The visit offers a faint sense of déjà vu.

Hu Jintao, set to hand over to Xi at a party congress late this year, went on his own diplomatic tour of the United States as vice president in April 2002, just months before his predecessor Jiang Zemin handed him the reins of power.

That time too there were tensions. The Pentagon planned to boost US presence in the Asia-Pacific, concerned by China's deployment of missiles near Taiwan and its rising military power -- a theme now back in the spotlight with President Barack Obama's "pivot" to Asia. Trade relations, however, were better then because China had just joined the World Trade Organisation.

Also, it was not a US election year.

Fleshy and slightly stooped, the 58-year-old Xi is the son of late, reformist vice premier Xi Zhongxun, making him one of the privileged "princelings": the sons and daughters of revolutionary leaders who rose under Mao Zedong.

Unlike past Chinese presidents who grew up in the provinces, Xi speaks the clear, standard Mandarin Chinese that is a mark of growing up in Beijing -- in his case in a guarded compound.

But Xi also experienced the tumult of Mao's era after his father was purged in 1962, when Mao turned against long-time comrades out of the belief that they threatened the purity of his revolution. Like many urban youths, the younger Xi was sent to work in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), where he rose to become a commune official.

He later studied chemical engineering at Tsinghua University in Beijing, an elite school where President Hu also studied. Xi gained a doctorate in Marxist theory from Tsinghua.

"He is a self-confident leader," said Orlins, the president of the National Committee on United States-China Relations.

"In China, coming from that kind of background, you tend to have more self-confidence and that exhibits itself in dealing with foreigners, as well as Chinese," said Orlins.

Xi's "red" background has prompted some observers to speculate he could take a tougher stance against Washington, which would reflect growing nationalist sentiment in China.

On a trip overseas in 2009, Xi bristled at the international demands piling up at Beijing's door.

"Some foreigners with full bellies and nothing better to do engage in finger-pointing at us," he said, in comments that spread on China's Internet and drew applause from many readers.

But recently, he stressed Beijing's desire for steady relations and sought to set an amicable tone for his visit.

"Sino-US relations stand at a new historic starting point, and both sides must take a long-term perspective and demonstrate political courage and decisiveness to overcome obstacles that have long stood in the way of Sino-US strategic mutual trust and impeded deeper cooperation," he told a meeting in Beijing.

"China and the United States have every reason and ample room to develop cooperation and partnership."

In August, Xi hosted US Vice President Joe Biden on a visit that gave Washington policymakers a chance to size up the president-in-waiting.

Biden described Xi as "totally engaging", saying he was "open about the nature and the extent of their problems, what they're going to have to deal with, short-term and long-term."

Xi probably wants a pragmatic but frank tone in dealings with Washington, Zhang Musheng, a former Chinese government official who has met Xi and other rising officials and written widely about their challenges, told Reuters.

"Everybody says he's very self-confident. One Chinese said to me, 'He is more like Mao (Zedong) or Deng (Xiaoping) than he is like Hu or Jiang,'" said Bonnie Glaser a senior fellow at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies who studies Chinese foreign policy.

"This may be a much more decisive leader, less cautious. There is some evidence that he is -- I don't want to say a risk-taker -- but that he is less risk averse," said Glaser.

Xi served a long stint as a party official in poor rural areas of Hebei, the northern province that surrounds Beijing.

He later rose in the party hierarchy largely in richer provinces known for economic openness. That, and his late father Xi Zhongxun's legacy as an ally of liberal 1980s party chief Hu Yaobang, has boosted his image as a potential reformer.

As party boss in the southern province of Guangdong from 1978-80, the elder Xi helped open China's first experimental "economic zone" in Shenzhen, a key element of market reforms.

The son has crafted a low-key, sometimes bluff political style. He has complained that officials' speeches and writings were clogged with Party jargon and demanded more plain speaking.

Xi divorced his first wife and is married to Peng Liyuan, a singer of sugary folk ballads whose fame once rivalled her husband's, until the Party told her to keep a low profile as he moved up the ranks.

Their daughter, Xi Mingze, is widely reported to be studying at Harvard University under an assumed name. But Chinese leaders keep secret details of their personal lives.

Xi's love of Hollywood, however, is well-known.

At a 2007 dinner with the US ambassador to Beijing, Xi mentioned his affection for Hollywood films, including World War II stories such as "Saving Private Ryan", according to US diplomatic cables made public by WikiLeaks.

"Hollywood makes those moves well, and such Hollywood movies are grand and truthful," the notes on the meeting paraphrased Xi as saying. "Americans have a clear outlook on values and clearly demarcate between good and evil," Xi said.

"In American movies, good usually prevails."

The Malaysian Insider

Copyright © 2012 The Malaysian Insider

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/world/article/chinas-leader-in-waiting-carries-heavy-political-baggage-to-us/>