

US-China Relations: One Step at a Time
Asia Sentinel
February 16, 2012
By Khanh Vu Duc

US-China relations require incremental steps. For now at least, slow and steady may be the only option.

If anything, the visit by Chinese Vice President (and assumed future president) Xi Jinping to the White House has highlighted the continuing concerns between the two countries.

Certainly this trip reflects the growing importance of China in American politics, but the meeting itself was little more than an exercise in good planning and organization. While both sides effectively stuck to their talking points, protesters gathered outside the White House loudly addressed core concerns that were only briefly mentioned during the meetings.

From this point of view, it's hard to imagine any progress being made. However, to assume so would be to overlook the delicate relationship between the United States and China.

Incremental steps

Given the assigned importance of the visit—one need only look at the elaborate receptions Xi received—it was crucial that no one proceed off script. This meant closed meetings and well-rehearsed photo opportunities. This meant avoiding hot-button issues, much to the displeasure of activists and political opponents of President Obama, while giving signs of progress.

But let's not fool ourselves into thinking that this visit was a waste. Behind those closed doors, we may never know what was discussed, at least in detail. The brief concerns mentioned publicly, such as Vice President Biden's comments on the need for economic and human rights progress, were perhaps talked about at great length. The desire for China to play a greater role in the world was acknowledged, but how and in what fashion? Politics being politics, those watching from the outside are only given the briefest of glimpses into the decision-making process.

That the US seeks to develop closer, more productive ties with China is not in doubt—as much was said by President Obama—but the ultimate attainment of this goal will outlast him, and perhaps many future presidents, requiring years of diplomacy and luck. The peaceful rise of China isn't something that will happen overnight.

Core issues such as trade imbalance and human rights will continue to plague US-China politics until one or the other relents and a compromise is reached. On the matter of economics, it seems fairly reasonable that the US and China will arrive at some agreed-on compromise in the near future. However, on the matter of human rights, China has been firm on telling critics to butt out of its internal affairs.

Just how much and how far the US is willing to push the latter remains to be seen. Given that President Obama is in the midst of a re-election campaign, it seems unlikely he'll push too hard for fear of setting back US-China diplomatic relations should he win; but

he will push just hard enough so as to not lose the support of pro-democracy and human rights activists come November. For the time being, the election and domestic affairs are the primary concern for the Obama Administration.

Working towards global improvement

Improving relations between US and China will not only benefit these two countries but the world as a whole. An exaggeration? Not necessarily if one considers that the US and China are undisputed world powers, their influence far reaching, capable of shaping international politics. We need only look at the current bloodshed in Syria to see where opposing powers can hinder peace. But likeminded forces, when working together, can achieve much more.

It almost seems as if China is seeking to divide the Pacific Ocean, leaving the West to the US and the East to itself, the idea being that the US is free to do as it wishes on its own side of the ocean, and allow China the courtesy of doing the same. The problem, however, is that neither party "owns" the Pacific. Not only that, but countries within these spheres of influence might feel slighted at being treated like pawns. Rather than split the ocean apart and suffer headaches over who can do this or do that, working together would be beneficial to both countries.

I am not so idealistic as to believe the US and China will meld into some amorphous, political entity in pursuit of utopia, but a cooperative relationship is much more agreeable than an adversarial relationship.

Tentative first steps

One of the main criticisms launched at China is that its currency is artificially undervalued, thereby drawing manufactures to China at the expense of the US (and those countries also suffering similar problems). Moreover, intellectual theft against, and a ballooning trade deficit for the US, have made trade between American and China a priority issue.

For China to become a true partner in the international community, it cannot play by a different set of rules while everyone else follows another. Until such issues are completely and fully resolved, it's unlikely that US-China relations will see much progress.

Nevertheless, current and future US and Chinese leaders will continue to work towards bettering relations between both countries. The real tension between the US and China has always been the role the latter will play. While it has generally been accepted that China will one day assume a larger role in international politics, the question has been whether China is ready for such responsibilities. Still plagued with human rights violations, and as a single-party state that is fundamentally opposed to democracy, there is still much work to be done.

Copyright © 2005 - 2012 Asia Sentinel.

Source: http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4238&Itemid=171