

Political Worries in U.S. and China Color Obama Aide's Beijing Visit
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By Jane Perlez

BEIJING — The Obama administration's national security adviser, Thomas E. Donilon, ended two days of talks with China's top leaders Wednesday evening, a visit that was billed as low-key but was freighted as much with domestic politics in both the United States and China as with foreign policy.

As Mr. Donilon met with Hu Jintao, China's president, in the imposing Fujian Room of the Great Hall of the People on Tuesday, Mitt Romney was accusing President Obama of being soft on Beijing. For its part, the Obama campaign argues that Mr. Romney supported outsourcing jobs to other countries while running Bain Capital. The White House boasts that it initiated more tariff proceedings against China at the World Trade Organization than the Bush administration did.

The political jockeying at China's expense even before the presidential campaign gets fully under way makes the leadership here uneasy, foreign policy experts say. Mr. Hu raised the issue with Mr. Obama during their talks last month on the sidelines of an international conference in Mexico, the experts said.

Most of the senior leaders of the Communist Party will be retiring when the 18th National Party Congress gathers in the fall. As the old guard departs, it would like to hand over a relatively stable relationship with the United States, experts here say.

So a large part of Mr. Donilon's mission was just turning up in the Chinese capital, something he had not done since he was elevated from his deputy position to national security adviser in October 2010.

China's top leaders value their relationship with the White House most of all. Mr. Donilon's absence had been noted, said Shi Yinhong, a foreign policy adviser to the State Council, China's equivalent to the cabinet.

"They trust the White House more than the State Department or the Pentagon," Mr. Shi said.

In late 2011, Mr. Donilon suddenly canceled what was to be his first visit to Beijing as national security adviser. The cancellation upset Beijing. It came just as President Obama announced what the administration called a "pivot" toward Asia, a policy turn widely interpreted here as an effort to contain China by enhancing the American military presence in the Pacific and reinforcing Washington's regional alliances.

Mr. Donilon has long been the main figure in the management of the White House relationship with China and is no stranger to Mr. Hu. He has developed a good relationship with Dai Bingguo, the most seasoned of China's diplomats and the primary adviser to Mr. Hu on relations with the United States, American and Chinese diplomats say.

But from the Chinese point of view, there is nothing like a visit on home territory. And for Mr. Donilon, there were good reasons to make the trip as well.

Mr. Donilon, who was a lobbyist for Fannie Mae from 1999 to 2005, earned his foreign policy credentials in the Clinton administration as chief of staff to Secretary of State Warren Christopher and as an assistant secretary of state for public affairs. He is on a shortlist circulating in Washington to succeed Hillary Rodham Clinton as secretary of state if Mr. Obama wins a second term.

As Mr. Donilon was greeted in one opulent room after another, it was clear how much Beijing values its connections to the White House. After meeting the departing Mr. Hu on Tuesday, Mr. Donilon was greeted at the Great Hall of the People on Wednesday by Xi Jinping, who will almost certainly succeed Mr. Hu as general secretary of the Communist Party at this autumn's congress and become president next year.

In contrast to the formal Mr. Hu, Mr. Xi seemed at ease, speaking off the cuff about his trip to the United States earlier this year.

Mr. Donilon spent the most time with Mr. Dai, who is 71, has a taste for marathon diplomatic talks and is seen by American officials as the principal conveyor of American policy to China's leaders. Mr. Dai invited his guest to dinner at an exclusive lakeside restaurant.

In an effort to keep the visit as low-profile as possible, a trademark of Mr. Donilon's diplomatic style, the White House announced only the broadest strokes about what was discussed.

A senior administration official said the subjects included North Korea, the administration's renewed focus on Asia, and the growing disputes over resource claims in the South China Sea. An economic specialist from the White House traveled with Mr. Donilon, and the trade issues between China and the United States were discussed, the official said. Current hot topics around the globe — Iran, Afghanistan, Syria and the Middle East — were also on the agenda, he said.

The military relationship was the focus of a meeting with the vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, Gen. Xu Caihou. One of Mr. Donilon's priorities was to try to persuade Beijing that Washington's shift toward Asia was not driven primarily by military considerations but was part of a broader engagement, said a former Obama administration official before the trip started, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Tellingly, Mr. Donilon's visit coincided with the publication of an article on relations between China and the United States by Cui Tiankai, a vice foreign minister and one of China's most experienced diplomats in dealing with the United States. Mr. Cui was present at all the major meetings with Mr. Donilon.

In a section of the article clearly aimed at what China sees as Washington's meddling in disputes between China and its neighbors over the South China Sea, Mr. Cui wrote: "China is not the maker of these problems, and still less the perpetrator of the harm. Rather, it is a victim on which harm has been imposed."

Mr. Cui also criticized the Obama administration for what he called aggressive military moves, including advancing an anti-ballistic-missile system in the Asia-Pacific region.

"The United States must face the issue and convince China, other countries in the region and the international community that there is no gap between its policy statement on China and its true intentions," Mr. Cui wrote.

Bree Feng contributed research.

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