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After Barack Obama’s inauguration, we ran a series at China Beat of various China experts’ reading recommendations for Obama on China (See installments I, II, III, IV, V, VI). At the time, we assumed a trip to China would be one of Obama’s top priorities—as is now clear with the recent announcement that Obama will visit China in November 2009. So we sent out a few emails to China watchers from a variety of backgrounds, asking if they had advice for Obama as he prepares for the summit in Beijing. We previously posted Robert Kapp’s suggestions for the president; below, advice from Kerry Brown, Senior Fellow at Chatham House and author of, most recently, Friends and Enemies: The Past, Present and Future of the Communist Party of China.

Mr President:

You are about to visit a country that will almost certainly supplant your own some time in the next 20 years as the world’s largest economy, but a place that is still running on a system of governance largely borrowed from the Soviet Union in the middle of the 20th century. It is a country that is central to the solution to the key global issues of your own presidency: international security, the environment, energy and food security, and sustainable global economic development. Whether you like it or not, China’s non-involvement in the solution to any of these issues, purely because of its size, economic growth rate and political importance, will kill them.

You have one huge advantage. China has admitted since the visit of your predecessor President Nixon in 1972 that it cannot achieve what it has to, in order to remain stable and achieve prosperity for its citizens, without the US. It regards the EU largely with frustrated disdain. It distrusts, and is distrusted by its regional neighbours. Africa and Latin America are its economic playgrounds. The US, and the US alone, has the power and influence to continue to change China. The government of the PRC, and in particular the elite in the Communist Party of China, are all too aware of this. While they may have interpreted the recent economic crisis as highlighting all the weaknesses of the western economic system, they remain impressed, and indebted, to the US. They respect its political and military power. And there is no serious suggestion that they wish to move away from making relations with the US, and the US alone, their key foreign policy objective.

The Communist Party is outwardly united, but inwardly divided. The ways in which your administration has talked to China as an equal has brought this internal division out. For some in the elite, it is regarded with deep suspicion, something the west is trying to use to empower China before seeing it sink, overwhelmed by the new responsibilities it is trying to face. For others, this new position is too much, too soon. They are all too aware of China’s massive internal challenges — huge inequalities in wealth and development, massive resource and environmental challenges, increasing social instability, and political and judicial institutions that are simply not fit for purpose for the stresses and expectations an enormous, complex population is placing on them. Last year alone there were 12 million petitions of the Central Government by dissatisfied citizens, with 115,000 protests, according to official figures. The elite cannot even decide whether lawyers, and the rule of law, are a threat or a benefit. Fifty lawyers this year have had their licenses to practice revoked for involvement in civil cases. This lack of consensus on what to do about creating a more accountable, just, modern system of government is a serious problem.

The US might view the Communist Party and its violent history with distaste. But the failure of the CCP would not be in the west’s interests. China would revisit a history of violent, horribly destructive upheaval. The unrest in Xinjiang in the summer, in which nearly 200 died, is only a stark reminder of how serious the tensions are that run under the surface in China. It is in the US’s interests to work with China where it can. The US will need to endure the constant suspicion and fear of the elite leadership. With the problems they have facing them, this is understandable. China is about to confront some of the greatest challenges in reforming its system of governance, and facing down issues of sustainability, economic transition, and growth that a government has ever faced. It has only two decades at most, and probably less, to achieve this. The next few years will see its leaders grappling with these issues. Wherever possible, the US’s partnership is the likeliest way to see an outcome that suits both China, and the US, and the rest of the world. But the fundamental issue is not
what the problems are — these are all recognised. The fundamental issue is how they can be solved. A partnership in which you, on behalf of the US, are able to demonstrate this, and then deliver it, could have consequences as historic as those which came from the visit of your predecessor Mr Nixon almost 40 years before.

Tags: Barack Obama