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Obama in China: Readings Around the Web

November 12, 2009 in The Five-List Plan by The China Beat | 2 comments

President Barack Obama is en route to Asia right now, and though he’ll also be making stops in Singapore, Japan, and South Korea, the centerpiece of his trip is the three days he’ll be spending in China. Tours of the Great Wall and the Forbidden City are, of course, on the itinerary, but Obama’s schedule in China isn’t limited to sightseeing; he’ll also be meeting with Chinese leaders in Beijing and Shanghai to discuss a range of issues, including re-evaluation of the renminbi, relations with North Korea, and climate change. We’ve compiled some of this week’s writings around the web into a quick reading list on the President’s first trip to China:

1. Foreign Policy has the full itinerary of Obama’s trip on its website, though we’re now hearing that his town hall meeting with students in Shanghai might be canceled, according to the Financial Times:

The White House had hoped the Monday morning forum would be President Obama’s one big chance to try and communicate directly with young Chinese people.

But as of this morning, according to a source familiar with the negotiations, there was still no agreement with the Chinese authorities on who would be present or how the question-and-answer session would work. And, most importantly for the White House, there was also no decision on whether it would be broadcast live on television and on the internet.

2. The U.S.-China Institute at the University of Southern California has put together an excellent briefing book for anyone who wants to check out resources related to the topics that Obama will be discussing while in China.

3. Ian Johnson at the Wall Street Journal has a piece on U.S.-China friction and the potential for real change to result from Obama’s trip. The outlook? Not so good, according to Johnson:

[Although relations are arguably better than ever, most of the issues on the table are also as intractable as ever.

The U.S., for example, is likely to at least hint that China should revalue upward its currency, the yuan. China is likely to politely decline. Both sides will agree that nuclear weapons shouldn’t spread, but are unlikely to agree on concrete measures to deal with North Korea, Iran or Pakistan. And as for a climate deal, both will want to wait for next month’s summit in Copenhagen before committing to anything.

All of this will make Mr. Obama’s trip less than epochal.

4. Also at the Wall Street Journal, UC Berkeley law professor Stanley Lubman has penned a letter to President Obama offering advice in advance of his trip (China Beat has also previously posted letters to Obama, one from Robert Kapp, and another by Kerry Brown). Writing that “Chinese law, like China, is a work in progress,” Lubman argues that the development of China’s legal profession is an area rich with the possibility of cooperation:

The United States can assist China to build its legal institutions without preaching.

In recent years the U.S. government, including your predecessor’s administration, has increased the support that it has given to strengthen labor rights, legal aid, open government, and administrative law, augmenting the support for these and other institution-building efforts by multilateral and U.S. NGOs. The current administration ought to increase that support while restraining highly public calls that urge China to speed up its adherence to Western values. You might suggest creation of a modest program of U.S.-Chinese cooperation on legal issues

While you are in China, you might explore whether there is interest in Beijing in welcoming foreign assistance in legal areas of common interest. Presidents Clinton and Jiang Zemin discussed the
possibility in 1997 and agreed on some areas of cooperation. Although Congress dropped the ball in refusing to provide funding, US foundations helped fill the gap. Your administration could move more decisively.

5. Finally, China Digital Times reports that "Oba-Mao" apparel, which has enjoyed brisk sales since Obama’s election last year, is being pulled from stores in Beijing for the duration of his visit. Officials from the Beijing Municipal Government apparently don’t want to risk offending Obama, just in case he decides to do some souvenir shopping at the Silk Market. If you haven’t picked up your own Oba-Mao t-shirt yet, though, don’t fret — they'll be available again once the President leaves.

Tags: Barack Obama