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Understanding China

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By Ron Javers

I'm just a soul whose intentions are good.

Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood!

—Nina Simone, 1964

Though the lyric was written for and recorded by Nina Simone in 1964, most Americans who remember it at all probably remember best the 1965 cover by Eric Burdon and the Animals, with its twangy guitar riffs and R&B-fired shriek of entreaty.

The tune was, of course, a big hit in that part of the American Century that was the 60s. By 1964, America's war-fueled economy was roaring and Chinese leaders were worried that as the Vietnam conflict spiraled out of control China itself might be invaded. Chairman Mao actually ordered a crash development plan—he was so good at these—for expanding industry and transportation in Southwest China, where the populace might retreat if they saw U.S. soldiers coming across the borders. Such was the pressure from the increasingly restive Soviets on one side and from the Americans on the other that by October 1964 China had designed and tested its very own atomic bomb. Don't let me be misunderstood, indeed.

Strangely or not, I found myself humming the tune this week while reading various media accounts of U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates's visit to Beijing. Misunderstandings seemed to abound throughout Gates's three-day stay in China's capital, a friendly visit that was intended to help set the tone for China President Hu Jintao's visit to Washington next week.

On the first day, as Gates sought to restore an amicable relationship and to restart suspended military-to-military talks between the world's two largest nations, he hit a stone wall thrown up by his Chinese counterpart, PLA Gen. Liang Guanglie. ("China Snubs U.S. Defense Pitch" was the aggressive headline in *The Wall Street Journal*.) The General allowed only that he would "study" the U.S. Defense Secretary's request for new talks after previous efforts had been suspended by China last January over U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. The general added, rather pointedly: "U.S. arms sales to Taiwan seriously damage China's core interests. And we do not want to see that happen again."

After wielding the stick, the general held out a tiny carrot, agreeing to narrower talks at an unspecified time in the first half of this year. China has repeatedly suspended the military-to-military talks over the last ten years, so many times in fact that one begins to wonder what may be the point of such meetings: What do the generals talk about when they talk about peace?

On the second day of his visit, Mr. Gates's olive branch appeared significantly wilted, as China's military conducted a surprise test of a new stealth fighter jet. If the tone for President Hu's upcoming visit was being set, it was at a high-decibel roar, and it begged the question of who was in charge in Beijing—the Chinese President or the PLA? The civilian leadership seemed to be caught off guard at the boldness—bad manners, some would say—in dealing with a foreign guest.

It will be up to President Hu and President Obama to throttle back a bit during their meetings in Washington if both nations are sincere about China's "peaceful rise." But some damage clearly has been done, and some concerns have been fueled on the American side, particularly the perennial worry over civilian control of the military in China. In the U.S., where the issue of civilian control has long been settled—the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff reports to Secretary Gates, who in turn reports to President Obama—even the protocol of the civilian Gates meeting with the uniformed Guanglie triggers a sort of political dyspepsia.

Tones and tunes may change, but the issues and expectations remain largely the same. An economically and militarily empowered, though politically one-noted China wants enhanced control

and security over its territory, rather widely defined, with the status of Taiwan being potentially the first deal breaker. A recession-and-debt embattled U.S. wants to retain its decades-long naval and political hegemony in the Pacific region, and also to uphold its traditional support for political freedom, democracy and national self-determination. These differing desires come at a time of some uncertainty, as the Chinese leadership is slated to undergo orderly change in 2012 when Vice President Xi Jinping becomes China's president and Vice Premier Li Keqiang becomes premier, and also at the moment of a right-wing political demarche in the U.S. that could conceivably see Mr. Obama as a one-term president.

Add to the above questions about currency manipulation, intellectual property rights, a very dangerous stalemate-by-proxy on the Korean Peninsula, attempts by both China and the U.S. to accommodate allies while provoking each other, particularly India for the U.S. and Pakistan for China, and you have a lengthy mutual agenda that can be barely ticked off next week, let alone seriously addressed.

So opportunities for misunderstandings on both sides abound. Both Mr. Hu and Mr. Obama need to be humming the same tune next week, loose-lipped generals and militant Wall Street Journal headline writers to the contrary. Nor will the final headline on their summit be the defining word on this protean relationship. Wars begin with a single shout; peace and friendship depend upon long, deep and often quiet conversations between allies.

The apposite Chinese proverb here is "One generation plants the trees; another gets the shade." That, at least, sounds understandable.

Ron Javers, former Executive Editor of Newsweek International, is founder and principal of Ron Javers Worldwide, a media advisory service for companies and other organizations operating in the international sphere.