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Pre-Summit Positioning

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By Scott Kennedy

Preparations for Wednesday's state visit by Hu Jintao have been underway for several months. Most of that time was spent negotiating over what deals would be reached, whether there would be a joint statement, and what food would be served. I'm particularly interested to see: 1) Whether Chinese first lady Liu Yongqing will eat the standard fare put on the table as everyone else. She typically travels with her own chef and food; and 2) Whether the American media will get a good photo of the back of Hu Jintao's head to determine once and for all if he has a bald spot. Chinese media are forbidden to ever shoot him from behind. CNN, please...

In actuality, one of the most interesting turns of the past week has been the contrasting positioning the American and Chinese sides have adopted.

President Obama sent out his four department chiefs in charge of foreign policy to give China-specific speeches. Secretary of Defense Gates, Secretary of Treasury Geithner, Secretary of Commerce Locke, and Secretary of State Clinton all sang the same tune: The United States and China are very different, and China needs to adapt its behavior, if not its views, in order for it to be accepted as a member of mainstream international society.

Secretary Gates focused on China's military build-up and the PLA's limited transparency, while Geithner and Locke focused on a variety of Chinese market barriers, from the Renminbi's value to indigenous innovation policies that put American firms at a disadvantage in China and elsewhere. But it was [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's address](#), the last of the four, which brought all of the various components together in one coherent and complete message.

Her statement had a clear logical coherence to it: The US and China are different > The United States is the steward of international society > International society is built on multilateral institutions > China is still not a full member of international society > China must change its security, economic, and human rights policy to come into compliance with its international obligations, which is for its own good and the good of the rest of the world > Mutual trust can only be built by China taking concrete steps to adopt these changes.

A few examples:

The US and China have differences:

"We are two complex nations with very different histories, with profoundly different political systems and outlooks."

"To keep our relationship on a positive trajectory, we also have to be honest about our differences. We will address them firmly and decisively as we pursue the urgent work we have to do together. And we have to avoid unrealistic expectations that can be disappointed. This requires steady effort over time to expand the areas where we cooperate and to narrow the areas where we diverge, while holding firm to our respective values."

Trust depends on action:

"The success of the relationship depends on its ability to deliver positive results to the people of both our nations, first and foremost, but also to the rest of the world."

China must act in the context of international institutions:

"Embracing the obligations that come with being a 21st century power will help to realize a future that will give the Chinese people even more, in fact, unimagined opportunities. But that means accepting a

share of the burden of solving common problems, abiding by and helping to shape a rules-based international order.”

In its stress on differences and the importance of multilateral institutions, the Obama Administration’s tone is quite different from that of his predecessor. Certainly the US has not forsaken power politics, but Secretary Clinton’s speech was entirely consistent with the liberal internationalist school of international relations theory. The final giveaway was her not so subtle attack against realism:

“In the 21st century, it does not make sense to apply zero-sum 19th century theories of how major powers interact. We are moving through uncharted territory. We need new ways of understanding the shifting dynamics of the international landscape, a landscape marked by emerging centers of influence, but also by non-traditional, even non-state actors, and the unprecedented challenges and opportunities created by globalization. This is a fact that we believe is especially applicable to the U.S.-China relationship. Our engagement – indeed, I would say our entanglement – can only be understood in the context of this new and more complicated landscape.”

Why has the US decided to emphasize differences in the run-up to the visit?

For one, in the wake of the financial crisis China appears to have calculated that it could be more assertive in a number of policy areas, and this newfound confidence was exhibited across the policy spectrum, and highlighted the different positions of the US and China. In the last year it has become clear China overstepped. That has led to a backlash by China’s neighbors, and the US has capitalized on this uneasiness. Its relationships with countries around China, save North Korea, are increasingly robust. Hence, the US is surprisingly in a position of strength against China.

For two, although President Obama’s domestic political standing has risen of late, he cannot be seen to coddle the Chinese on any issue lest he make himself vulnerable to attacks about being weak on defense, not defending American jobs, or sacrificing American values. If the visit were in Beijing, American rhetoric may not have been as strident.

And for three, President Hu’s political fortunes are most assuredly on the downswing. He has another 21 months as Party Secretary and 26 months as president, and the clock is ticking. Although he has led China to be more assertive, he also likely does not want to be seen as having wrecked the relationship. The US side may be gambling that the best defense against a Chinese leader on the way out is a good offense.

The Obama Administration’s approach not only differs from W’s but also from that of the Chinese side. [In response to written questions](#) from the *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*, Hu Jintao stressed the common interests of both countries. His grammar was the reverse of Secretary Clinton’s: We may have some differences, but our common interests are so clear that the two countries must cooperate. Moreover, his description of China took it as a given that China is a leading global power and a central member of the international system, and such standing is not conditional on US approval:

“China and the United States have major influence in international affairs and shoulder important responsibilities in upholding world peace and promoting common development. Under the new circumstances, the common interests of our two countries have been growing and areas of cooperation expanding. There is great potential for our mutually beneficial cooperation both in advancing Asia-Pacific regional cooperation and in improving global economic governance and promoting sustainable growth of the world economy; both in expanding cooperation in economy and trade and in strengthening cooperation in new areas like new energy sources, clean energy, infrastructure development and aviation and space; and both in fighting terrorism and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and in meeting challenges like natural disasters, food security and major communicable diseases.”

It will be fascinating to see if the two sides’ pre-summit approaches carry over to the visit itself. Not only will I be watching to see what is on Ms. Liu’s plate, I’ll be anxiously listening to the toasts of two presidents. Ganbei!

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