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The Three Reaffirms: Suggested Agenda for President Obama's Visit to China

Dean Cheng

President Obama's visit to Asia will take him on his first official visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Advance word is that the President intends to confer with PRC President Hu Jintao on three main subjects:

- Pushing China to help with the ongoing global economic crisis;
- Pushing China to be a more active participant in efforts to curtail global warming; and
- Pushing China to be a more direct participant in efforts to constrain nuclear proliferation.

While all of these issues have gained a great deal of publicity, the prospect of any progress on them is greatly exaggerated. The subject of nuclear proliferation, for example, involves the general concern about the spread of nuclear materials, the knowledge associated with nuclear weapons design, and the specific cases of Iran and North Korea.

Non-Proliferation No-Go. China, as a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and a member of the five veto-wielding states on the U.N. Security Council, is an essential part of any curtailment of nuclear proliferation, either generally or specifically. But while Chinese leaders have made public statements supporting non-proliferation, those statements have not translated into concrete action in the specific cases of Iran and North Korea.

Indeed, there is little evidence that Beijing is prepared to meaningfully curtail trade or other interactions with either state, thereby undermining any chance of success for any multinational sanctions

regime. Instead, as was seen in Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to North Korea, nuclear non-proliferation appears to be a secondary objective in Chinese foreign policy—and that is unlikely to change simply because of meetings between Presidents Obama and Hu.

Time for a Reminder. As demonstrated by the non-proliferation issue, there are unlikely to be any major initiatives arising from President Obama's visit to the PRC. But that does not mean that this visit is pointless. In particular, as this is the first visit by Obama as President to Asia, it is to be expected that his every word and gesture will be heavily scrutinized and subjected to analysis across the region.

Under such circumstances, and given the intractability of the issues confronting him, it would be timely to remind Chinese and other Asian observers of the fundamental truths of American foreign policy: that the U.S. has long been an Asian power and will remain the preeminent power there long into the future. The region is a core U.S. national interest, and it is essential that other nations clearly understand this fact. To this end, the President should emphasize to President Hu what might be termed "the three reaffirms."

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(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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Reaffirming American Alliances. The U.S. has a network of allies in the western Pacific and east Asia. In many cases, these alliances have been solidified through the mutual sacrifice of lives as well as treasure. Through many changes in U.S. Administrations, both Democrat and Republican, those alliances have remained cornerstones of U.S. foreign policy in the region. President Obama should remind Chinese and Asian leaders that those alliances will remain firm under his Administration.

Reaffirming American Commitments. Two American commitments are, at the moment, particularly relevant: the Taiwan Relations Act and America's pledge to maintain peace in the western Pacific.

Under the Taiwan Relations Act, the U.S. remains committed to considering "any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means...a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States" and to providing Taiwan arms to guard against this threat.¹ Dating back to commitments made by Ronald Reagan, the U.S. has refrained from inserting itself into cross-straits negotiations while also not engaging in prior consultations with the PRC regarding arms sales to Taiwan.

Again, this is a fundamental tenet of U.S. foreign policy toward the region, including American relations with the PRC, and has been for the past 30 years. If pressed, as he is likely to be, the President should make clear to the PRC that U.S. arms sales to Taiwan—based solely on the mutual assessments of the U.S. and Taiwan on Taiwan's defense requirements—will continue. The thaw in cross-straits relations is welcomed. But Taiwan's peace, freedom, and prosperity are dependent on its ability to resist Chinese coercion.

In addition, the U.S. remains committed to maintaining peace and security throughout the western Pacific, including freedom of navigation.

Chinese General (and CMC Vice Chairman) Xu Caihou, in his recent visit to Washington, called for the U.S. to pull back its ships and aircraft from China's exclusive economic zone. President Obama should make it clear, in no uncertain terms, that while the U.S. will continue to respect other nations' territorial waters, it will also continue to operate within international waters, both in accordance with its security commitments and requirements and in support of the long-standing principle of freedom of navigation.

Reaffirming American Principles. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's apparent dismissal of human rights in her February speech in Seoul remains controversial.² To suggest that human rights cannot "interfere" with policies regarding the global economic crisis, climate change, or security is to create a false dichotomy. The deleterious effect of Secretary Clinton's remarks is something that President Obama apparently recognized and sought to address at the July Security and Economic Dialogue. At that conference, he observed that it is a fundamental part of U.S. culture to support the right of all people to speak their minds freely and to respect and protect the religion and culture of all peoples.³

Given the recent violence in Xinjiang as well as ongoing tensions in Tibet, including along the Sino-Indian border this week, it is clear that these issues of human rights, far from receding, are instead likely to gain salience in the coming months and years. It would behoove the President, then, to make it clear to Chinese leaders that the U.S. will continue to stand by its principles of supporting freedom worldwide.

American Interests Remain Consistent. As this is the first visit of President Obama to China, there is little doubt that the Chinese are intent on taking the measure of this new figure on the American political stage. For the U.S., it is essential that Chinese leaders understand that changes in the

1. Taiwan Relations Act, Public Law 96-8, 96th Cong., 1st Sess., at http://www.ait.org.tw/en/about_Ait/tra (November 12, 2009).
2. CNN, "Clinton: Chinese Human Rights Can't Interfere with Other Crises," February 22, 2009, at <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/02/21/clinton.china.asia/index.html> (November 12, 2009).
3. President Barack Obama, "Dialogue Is Essential Step in Advancing Positive, Comprehensive Relations," remarks to the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, July 27, 2009, at <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/July/20090727111325bpuh0.2506067.html&distid=ucs> (November 12, 2009).

White House may lead to changes in methods and approaches but that underlying American interests remain constant. Not only will the Chinese appreciate this information, especially if expressed frankly, but they will likely respect and cooperate with Pres-

ident Obama more in the future if they know—in no uncertain terms—where he stands.

—Dean Cheng is Research Fellow in Chinese Political and Security Affairs in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.