

After A Successful Summit, Both the United States and China Need Domestic Consensus on Bilateral Relations

By Da Wei

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After a series of disturbances in the year following the summit between China's President Hu Jintao and United States President Barak Obama in Beijing in November 2009, the U.S.-China relationship needed help. It was imperative for the two presidents both to show strong support for a positive relationship and to send clear messages to reassure each other about the future direction of bilateral relations. By this criterion, President Hu's January 2011 state visit to Washington was a success. The two presidents made very clear that their two governments seek stable and cooperative China-U.S. relations and are determined not to choose a "New Cold War" or "Cold War Lite." This is the outcome that U.S.-China relations needed, and the two presidents achieved it. Still, securing a durable and stable bilateral relationship requires more than this—and more than can be accomplished at summits.

As usual, some observers in both countries will say that there is "nothing new" from this state visit. Critics in the United States may argue that the summit confirmed that China will not change its policies on the currency exchange rate, human rights, China's military modernization, North Korea and climate change. Chinese critics may assert a lack of change in U.S. positions, citing news reports that the United States is planning for another round of arms sales to Taiwan and concluding that the summit did nothing to show that the United States would cease its efforts to "contain" China.

Such criticisms are wrong in two respects. First, they fail to appreciate what the summit accomplished. The two countries need to avoid a "new Cold War" or relations that are "warm economically, cool politically." Both in East Asia and globally, it is not in the interests of China, the United States or others for China and the United States to regard each other as enemies or rivals. The Washington summit has helped to reduce the likelihood of this undesirable outcome.

Second, critics' expectations for the summit were too high. Such excessively high expectations, and the disappointments that can follow them, are a recurring problem. They characterized the Obama administration's early approach to China policy. Although it rejected the idea publicly, the Obama administration did have a kind of "G2 mindset" during its first year, apparently believing that China and the United States could and would cooperate to handle a range of international issues. Thus, the United States postponed some decisions that it knew China would not like, such as arms sales to Taiwan. In return, Washington expected China to cooperate with the United States to address regional and global issues such as climate change, North Korea and Iran—largely on Washington's preferred terms. When China refused to do so and the Obama administration decided to sell weapons to Taiwan and meet with the Dalai Lama at the White House, both sides became

disappointed and frustrated with the state of bilateral relations. The lesson we can draw from this and other cycles of ups and downs of China-U.S. relations during the first two years of the Obama administration is that both countries need to be realistic about the relationship.

Overly high expectations preceded Hu's state visit as well. Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger, two former National Security Advisers who helped to break the ice of a China-U.S. Cold War and normalize bilateral relations in the 1970s, wrote articles in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, on the eve of the summit that called for redefining the bilateral relationship and for finding new "big concept" (on the scale of the anti-Soviet agenda that once shaped U.S. foreign policy and U.S. China policy) to frame U.S.-China relations for next 30 years. The two long-time enthusiastic supporters of cooperative U.S.-China relations are accomplished strategists who continue to think in terms of big ideas. But such "big things" likely are not feasible now and surely cannot be achieved at a summit. The ship of U.S.-China relations has become too big and complex to be steered by a mere framework, concept, definition or joint communiqué. The bilateral relationship now deeply links two highly complex and very different countries. Their relations cover a very wide range of issues. No summit can resolve, or even address, all the issues in the bilateral relationship or recast its basis or character.

Events a week before Hu's state visit illustrate the complex nature of the bilateral relationship and a key challenge for its future. United States Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was in Beijing for an important pre-summit meeting on the day the U.S. naval ship, the USS Carl Vinson, arrived in Busan, Korea. The question, prominent in the Chinese media on that morning, was, "Has the Carl Vinson come to show American muscle while Secretary Gates is in Beijing?" In the afternoon, the news of the test-flight of China's J-20 aircraft was the headline. U.S. and Western media raised the question, "With the test of this stealth fighter, is China showing its muscle to Secretary Gates while he is visiting Beijing?"

We do not know the full story behind the Carl Vinson's voyage and the J-20 test, but the events of January 11 are revealing. Gates's pre-summit trip reflects the good will of the two countries to improve and develop political relations. But the day's events, and the reactions to them, also showed the underlying tension in bilateral security relations. We witnessed the eagerness of the leadership in both countries for cooperative relations, but we also saw deep-rooted suspicions among the media, average people and some foreign policy circles in both countries.

To some extent the pattern reflects the basic character of U.S.-China relations. The United States and China are interdependent and have strong bases for cooperation in many areas, but they also have conflicting interests and clashing aims in some other areas. Part of the issue lies elsewhere, in sometimes-uninformed— and often-varied—popular attitudes in both countries, and in the two countries' highly pluralistic foreign policy communities. Various government agencies, the military forces, local governments, big corporations, the media, netizens and others all are different groups that have different interests and concerns and that affect foreign policymaking in both countries. The pluralism in the U.S. foreign policymaking process is generally well understood, but as a relatively new phenomenon, pluralism in China's foreign policy community needs to be understood by both American and Chinese decision makers and analysts.

The United States and China need to address the challenges to bilateral relations posed by this pluralism, as well as by excessively high expectations about what can be accomplished in bilateral

relations. The two leaderships need to build domestic consensus among different foreign policy actors in their own countries. That consensus should include realism and restraint in bilateral relations. Policy-relevant groups in both countries need to accept that the future of a country, either the U.S. or China, depends on its own circumstances and efforts, rather than those of the other country. The future sustainable development of China depends on China, not on the United States. It is equally important to recognize that, for now, the future of the U.S.'s international supremacy depends on Americans themselves, rather than on Chinese. The United States does not have the capability to contain China, and it, therefore, needs to drop aspects of its current policy towards China that are containment rather than engagement. Chinese observers need to distinguish between containment and mere hedging in the China policy of the United States (and other countries). In the current global context in which interdependence has grown so dramatically, China has no capability to achieve a "coercive rise." The mainstream in China understands very well—and others need to accept—that China's "peaceful development" is not only a slogan, but the only possible choice. American analysts—and public opinion—need to distinguish between the "peaceful rise" that will come from the growth of Chinese power, and the history of Germany's and Japan's "unpeaceful rise."

The two presidents achieved all that they could reasonably have hoped for in Washington. But that is not enough. The two governments need to invest more political capital in maintaining and improving the relationship. Each government needs to educate its public and domestic actors who influence foreign policy. Done right, this can shape a domestic consensus in each country concerning policy toward the other. On that basis, China and the United States can build a cooperative bilateral relationship that is more sustainable and stable.