

Improving Mutual Understanding: Achievements and Potential Impact of President Hu Jintao's State Visit to the United States

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“A series of misperceptions and misunderstandings significantly undermined mutual trust on both sides of the Pacific [and] heightened distrust and suspicions have a real impact on U.S.-China relations.” The U.S. scholar of China-U.S. relations Peter Hays Gries made that comment about developments in 2008. The same observation can also be applied to explain the frictions between China and the U.S. in 2010. Chinese President Hu Jintao's state visit to Washington in January 2011 helped lay important foundations that can help to reduce such mistrust and its adverse consequences for China-U.S. relations.

It is true that there are some structural difficulties in China-U.S. relations. This is not surprising or entirely avoidable, considering the magnitude of the two countries' importance in the world system. Nonetheless, in the age of post-Cold War international politics and globalization, the geopolitical rivalry between countries has not been as important as it was in an earlier period when international relations was dominated by bilateral relations and traditional security issues. Global challenges such as terrorism, climate change, epidemic disease and cross-border crimes have become the real obstacles and foremost threats to peace and the development of all countries.

Although the need and commitment to address such nontraditional issues can create bases for cooperation between China and the U.S., elements of power competition exist as well. And China-U.S. power competition was, to some degree, amplified by bilateral interactions in 2010. These interactions were an important cause of misperceptions and misunderstandings, especially likely to arise in times of rapid change in the international system and the world's political and economic situation, such as we currently face.

The Chinese side made promoting mutual understandings between the peoples of China and the United States a high priority for President Hu's state visit. In his talks with President Obama on January 19, President Hu used four phrases—enhancing dialogue, increasing mutual trust, expanding exchanges and deepening cooperation—to underline the emphasis on improving mutual understanding. Tellingly, Hu placed the four phrases immediately before proclaiming the goal to “open new prospects of bilateral partnership.” It is quite clear that China thinks that the two countries' different perceptions and mutual mistrust have had a negative impact on their ability to achieve cooperation in practice. As China sees it, without improvement of understanding, China-U.S. cooperation on common interests will be restrained.

During Hu's state visit, China advanced a strategy for improving mutual understandings included three parts:

First, President Hu fully affirmed China's willingness to join in international cooperation to maintain peace, facilitate development and deal with global and regional problems. On several occasions, President Hu stressed to his audience China's strategy of peaceful development. He declared that China adheres to a basic state policy of opening to the world and will continue to combine pursuit of its interests with pursuit of the common interests of international community. With such statements, China tries to eliminate or at least reduce the world's uncertainty about a rising China's strategic intentions. China also thus reconfirms its commitment to the world that its development will be a plus not minus to all parties. China also reaffirmed, in the Joint Statement issued at the summit, that China welcomes the U.S. as an Asia-Pacific nation that contributes to peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

Second, China believes that China-U.S. mutual understanding can only be improved through advancing practical cooperation in areas of common interests. Unquestionably, China and the U.S. have many common interests globally, regionally and bilaterally, but the two countries have encountered significant difficulties in translating their concurrent recognition of common interests into effective common actions of cooperation. Last year's practice in China-U.S. relations—plagued by friction over many issues—vividly illustrated this problem. The Chinese side thinks that the reason for this phenomenon is that the “common interests” have been defined in such an abstract and comprehensive way that they cannot provide a basis for effective cooperation in practice. China therefore sought to use the occasion of President Hu's state visit to work to specify areas of common interests with the U.S., to set priorities for cooperation, to draw up working plans and to make clear the outcomes that the two sides want to achieve. This endeavor produced tangible results in the form of agreements reached by the two governments in conjunction with the state visit. Further progress in addressing issues of common interest and in improving bilateral cooperation more generally can be expected if the agreements are fully implemented.

Third, China believes that expanding and deepening the two societies' understanding of each other will substantially reduce mutual suspicions and increase mutual trust. It has been forty years since China and the U.S. reopened their doors to one another, and there are now many channels of exchange between China and the United States in the areas of education, academics, science and technology, culture and so on. Connections between the two societies, however, are still insufficient. They are thin compared to the dense interactions between the two countries in political, economic and even security areas.

Specifically, China thinks that it is important for U.S. society to have a better understanding of China's strategic posture. If U.S. society does not trust in the peaceful nature of Chinese culture and Chinese society, the United States will not be able to accept that China will not seek to become a hegemonic power and pursue territorial expansion after it rises. In addition, China seeks a better understanding of U.S. society as a means to furthering economic ties. During the era of China's Reform and Opening to the Outside World, China has opened its economy greatly to the United States. The two countries' economies have become deeply interwoven. Now, Chinese enterprises are increasingly interested in investment in the United States, which will require greater Chinese understanding of U.S. society and U.S. understanding of China's. To address both economic and security issues, therefore, promoting the two societies' exchanges and mutual understandings was a very important element of President Hu's mission during the state visit.

China and the United States outlined many programs for promoting cultural and social exchanges during Hu's visit. Generally speaking, the two countries are undertaking to extend interactions beyond the central or federal government levels to local governments, beyond coastal and big cities to their inner and heartland areas, beyond intellectual elites to general publics. With more institutions, communities and groups participating in and benefiting from China-U.S. cooperation, China hopes that the two countries' relations will have a more solid and broad foundation and therefore will be more stable in the future.

On the whole, President Hu's January 2011 state visit to the United States was a success. The two governments can point to several important tangible achievements from the visit. Of course, China hopes that the agreements reached during President Hu's state visit will be implemented fully in practice. The agreements and their implementation will be helpful in building further China-U.S. cooperation on political, economic and security issues. In addition to such concrete accomplishments, the intangible factors of summitry—including communications between the two leaders and, through the leaders, between the two societies—are especially worthy of notice and potentially very valuable for the future development of bilateral relations. In China's view, without such improvements in mutual understanding in cultural and spiritual areas, it will be difficult to achieve further advances in U.S.-China cooperation and bilateral relations. Better mutual understanding in areas that extend beyond material interests can advance China-U.S. cooperation into a new phase, in keeping with the hope expressed by Chinese leaders in connection with the visit.