

The Xi-Obama Summit: A Critical Moment to Rethink the Sino-U.S. Relationship

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Scholars and analysts in the U.S. are debating ways to deal with the Sino-U.S. relationship, with some calling for a rethinking of U.S. policy. In the report *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China*, Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis regard China as “the most significant competitor,” and recommend “a new U.S. policy of balancing China.” Jeffrey Bader emphasizes that the reconciliation between the United States and China is “in danger of unraveling.” Dr. David M. Lampton argued that the U.S.-China relationship was nearing “the tipping point”. Scholars and analysts from China also worry about the future of Sino-U.S. relationship.

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Now, eyes around the world are focused on the coming Xi-Obama summit at the end of this month. What can they do to adjust the course of the Sino-U.S. relationship?

Certainly, there are many differences between China and the U.S., from the East and South China Sea territorial disputes to cyber security to human rights. Deep mutual distrust is the fundamental problem that unsettles the Sino-U.S. relationship. But the most critical problem is not the differences per se, but the way each side deals with them.

Principles Guiding Sino-U.S. Relationship Should Be Reaffirmed

It's impossible for President Xi Jinping and President Obama to resolve all their differences through a summit, but they can reaffirm principles now guiding the Sino-U.S. relationship.

During their summit in 2013, the two presidents agreed to build a bilateral relationship based on practical cooperation and constructive management of differences. Since then, deepening practical cooperation and constructively managing differences have become the key principles guiding Sino-U.S. relationship.

As many U.S. experts and analysts doubt China's strategic intentions, Chinese experts and analysts also distrust the U.S. The U.S. needs to realize that China, while skeptical of its strategic intentions, is indeed seeking a new type of great-power relationship. It's not a temporary tactic, but a long term policy choice. To mitigate the deep mutual distrust, it would be desirable for the U.S. to restate that the U.S. "welcomes the peaceful rise of China as a responsible power," and reaffirm that it has no intention to contain or destabilize China. China, meanwhile, needs to reaffirm its respect for the U.S. presence and interests in the Asia Pacific as President Xi has stated at several occasions.

If President Xi and President Obama can reach a consensus, reaffirming principles guiding Sino-U.S. relationship and re-clarifying their strategic intentions, it will lay a strong foundation for the bettering off of Sino-U.S. relationship.

Taking a Balanced View of the Power Redistribution

When discussing U.S. and Chinese strategic intentions, some scholars or analysts from both sides didn't properly understand the strength and limit of its counterpart country, thus made some pessimistic, even misleading conclusions.

Since the end of the Cold War, global power has been redistributed. In Asia Pacific, China has won a splendid progress, and its influence greatly increased. The U.S. is still the strongest power in the world. But it cannot do whatever it wants even though it still owns primacy in Asia Pacific and worldwide.

When stating that the U.S. intends to contain or destabilize China, the Chinese experts and analysts didn't realize that it was an impossible objective for the U.S. to achieve. What all countries in this region highly desire is peace, stability, and prosperity. They welcome the U.S. presence to balance China, but don't want to choose sides because they also have a close relationship with China.

When stating that China intends to replace the U.S. with its own primacy or to exclude the U.S. from Asia Pacific, the U.S. experts and analysts overstated China's strength, and completely disregarded China's policy statements.

So finding a balanced way to view the strength and limits of the U.S. and China might lead to a more impartial and less pessimistic conclusion about the future Sino-U.S. relationship.

Deepening the Practical Cooperation and Extending the Common Interests

As powers with many differences, the U.S. and China have various common interests, bilaterally, regionally and globally. Many challenges such as nuclear proliferation, climate change, global terrorism, epidemic disease and cyber security need to be met cooperatively. It may be right to say that almost all issues undermining the Sino-U.S. relationship can be solved if both sides could take an active posture.

It is necessary for President Xi and President Obama to reaffirm their resolve to meet every challenge. Each concrete step in the cooperation will be a meaningful move for trust accumulation.

Every achievement they've made should be emphasized, and it is unwise to let the differences or quarrels overshadow the achievements. Differences should not be ignored, neither should they be overemphasized. It would be preferable if differences in one area don't hinder cooperation in others'. This will be helpful for the U.S. and China to narrow their gaps and extend their common interests.

Countries with a Rule-based Relationship Can Enjoy More Trust

U.S. officials have frequently criticized China for not acting following international rules, and urged it to solve territorial disputes with its neighbors by international law. Chinese officials frequently criticize the U.S. for its double-standard in dealing with international affairs.

It's difficult for the U.S. and China to build strategic trust, but interactions based on international rules may be helpful in advancing such trust. They may not make compromises on issues like values and political systems, but it's highly possible for them to arrive at consensuses on particular issues like trade conflict, nuclear proliferation and climate change.

If the Sino-U.S. relationship is based on rules, their differences might be solved smoothly. If the summit could show the two powers' strong commitment to international rules, it will deliver a strong push for a stable Sino-U.S. relationship. And the mutual trust may increase accordingly.

President Xi's visit to the U.S. comes at a critical moment. When minds change, the future will be different. That's what people may expect from the coming summit.

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