

What America and China Must Not Forget

By PAUL GEWIRTZ JAN. 18, 2011

Two starkly different paths for U.S.-China relations have become apparent as Presidents Barack Obama and Hu Jintao hold their summit meeting in Washington this week. The first path is one of cooperation and actions that build trust and create mutual benefits. The second is continuing the current downward drift in relations with ever-expanding mistrust and conflict.

However, the fact that the United States and China have many common interests does not mean that we will inevitably pursue them. Nor does China's rising economic and military power mean inevitable conflict, as fatalistic doomsayers in both countries are arguing.

The United States and China are now so entangled with each other economically that conflict — whether escalating trade protectionism or belligerent rivalry for spheres of influence or military provocation — inflicts major harm on both countries. And there are so many global problems that require U.S.-China cooperation if the world is to find solutions — including climate change, energy scarcity, nuclear proliferation, genocide and pandemics — that we have large incentives and responsibilities to cooperate.

The central problem in the U.S.-China relationship right now is mutual mistrust. Large numbers of Chinese in and out of the government believe that the United States is out to stop China's rise and is actively seeking to overthrow the government. Even as many Chinese see America as a declining power, they also see America's strength and react to U.S. criticism of China through history's lens of China's occupation and "humiliation" by Western countries and Japan.

Large numbers of Americans fear or feel frustrated by China's rapid economic rise, particularly at a time of our own economic difficulties. As a growing economic power, China's military is also growing. Many Americans fear this growth, given the uncertainty about China's military objectives and China's increasing assertiveness, especially in the Pacific region, and its voracious appetites for energy and natural resources (which the United States shares).

Although China is a one-party, authoritarian state where numerous human rights abuses take place, China is not a monolith. The reality on the ground is that China is multifaceted and constantly changing. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty. Many political dissidents are being harshly repressed, but day to day, most Chinese have wide freedom in their lives, and there have been many positive reforms in China's legal system.

Cheerful entrepreneurial energy is everywhere. People in the government and the citizenry have and express many diverse viewpoints. The work I do in China puts me in constant contact with Chinese reformers both in the government and outside the government, and their numbers appear to be growing. China's leaders understand that the country faces huge domestic challenges resulting from unbalanced growth, and are largely focused on addressing those.

There is one way to dispel the mutual mistrust that currently exists in the U.S.-China relationship: acknowledge it, and work together to produce concrete results that demonstrate each side's good faith and the benefits of cooperation over conflict. Our leaders need to tackle the large issues that contain the potential for conflict and opportunities for cooperation, with parallel dialogues by leaders and experts outside of government.

People-to-people exchanges need to be expanded to produce a firmer foundation for positive U.S.-China relations. It isn't naïve to think that these things are possible, although it is certainly naïve to think they will be easy.

The United States needs to give China incentives to follow a beneficial developmental path — incentives that inevitably will include both carrots and sticks, both reassurances and pressure, but that take place within a framework of cooperation and growing trust.

China, in turn, needs to take actions in the economic sphere that assure the United States that it will be a fair competitor, abide by international legal norms, provide more reassurances about its growing military power, and play a stronger global role in addressing challenges such as North Korea.

As the secretary of the Treasury, Timothy Geithner, said last week, there are some things that China wants from us that we will do only if China does some things that we want. We also need to remember that there is a Chinese version of the same point: There are some things America wants from China that China will do only

if the United States does some things (or refrains from doing some things) that China cares about.

The summit will be a key test of whether American and Chinese leaders have it within their power and capacity to forge a cooperative relationship that benefits both peoples — and the rest of the world.

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