



INSIDE

• Digital trends: What we'll see in 2016 > p12

'Asymmetric harmony' good for Sino-US ties

Vital that each side comes to appreciate the other side's core interests, not just what they are, but also how they have come to be

Chinese President Xi Jinping has met again with US President Barack Obama, and pundits the world over were eager to offer suggestions and proposals to improve Sino-US relations. This is no altruism: it's not a matter of hoping to help China and the US get along; rather, everyone recognizes that their relations affect the stability and prosperity of the whole world.



Robert Lawrence Kuhn

Though good-willed and appreciated, much of the advice — whether prescriptions or proscriptions — is repetitive, even soporiferous. Maybe that's a good thing —

because predictability, in sensitive diplomacy as in financial markets, is a good thing. But maybe there's better advice.

The Xi-Obama meeting took place during the fourth Nuclear Security Summit, which was held in Washington on March 31 and April 1. While the aim of the summit was critical — preventing nuclear terrorism — attention was focused on the sidelines where the two leaders huddled.

The last time the two leaders met, in September, also in Washington, the summit went surprisingly well — considering the low expectations going in, what with cybersecurity and maritime disputes dominating the agenda. At the time, wise counsel was to focus on areas that unite us, not divide us, so the list stressed climate change, economic cooperation, fighting terrorism and organized crime, preventing pandemics, promoting alternative energy and green technologies, stopping regional wars, and the like.

While nothing in Sino-US relations is easy, these areas of common concerns are easier to handle — but are here not my focus. I prefer to tackle the thorny, contentious issues. How can the sides show mutual respect without compromising their core interests? And how can they accommodate each other without lapsing into appeasement?

Honesty is a place to start, even if not so politically correct. Here's what some on each side, suspicious of the other, really think.

In China, some say that the US seeks to "contain China" and thwart its historic rise. They see the US encircling China by alliances, explicit or implicit, with Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam,

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and India; manipulating Taiwan to keep the motherland divided; coercing China to open its markets in order to control its industries and exploit consumers; restricting Chinese companies' operations and mergers and acquisitions in the US; hacking China's computers and sending spy planes to patrol China's shores; fomenting "extremism, separatism and terrorism" in the Tibet and Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous regions; and injecting Western values to overwhelm Chinese values, eroding China's independence and undermining its sovereignty.

In the US, some say that China is a looming political and military challenger, an economic superpower that plays by its own rules and whose opaque intentions are intimidating its neighbors; China acts solely in its own interests, critics claim, even to the detriment of the international

order; China is a mercantile predator that uses government power to promote commercial interests, boosting exports and stealing jobs, and allows nefarious hacking and industrial theft. Moreover, the government limits human rights to maintain control, and China's mounting military power, especially its modernizing blue-water navy, betrays expansionist ambitions.

How to deal with such sweeping, invidious suspicions? The normal way is for leaders to emphasize commonalities and manage differences, which seems to work well at first, but then often seems to backslide.

There is no magic solution. While progress is best made incrementally, not precipitously, I like to push for fresh perspectives.

I've been thinking about how to characterize differences between China and the US, and a descrip-

tive term I've been playing with is "asymmetric". Because the core interests of China and the US are not the same — which is fortunate — a zero-sum game is not inevitable. We hear about "asymmetric warfare". How about "asymmetric peacefare"?

Contrast US-China disputes with, say, the struggle between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany to control Poland. That was a "symmetric dispute" in that each side wanted the same thing, turning it into a classic zero-sum game and becoming one of the factors that led to World War II.

This is no such symmetric dispute between China and the US, and therein lies the potential for progress.

So what are the kinds of asymmetric disputes and how can they be handled?

There is an obvious political

asymmetry. Obama is in his last year in office and seeks, in his opinion, what's best for the US, without having to worry about the next election. Xi has yet many years in office and seeks, in his opinion, what's best for China — what it will take to transform his country through economic transition, reform and the rule of law. More important, though, is the China-US asymmetry in core interests.

China would like the US to understand and respect its three core interests: China's political system, which China's leaders believe serves the best interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people; China's development as the country's highest priority, which leads naturally to the need for social stability, especially during a time of economic complexities when deep and sensitive reforms are essential; and China's sovereignty over specific land and maritime territories, which reflect both historic realities and national pride.

The US would like China to understand and respect its three core interests (with respect to China): the sanctity of the international order and the standards of international law; accepted norms of behavior in economics and commercial activities; and respect for human rights and various freedoms.

It is vital that each side comes to appreciate the other side's core interests, not just what they are, but also how they have come to be. Each side should come to discern the ways of thinking that led to the specific development of each core interest. In this manner, by discerning different "ways of thinking", one acquires deeper understanding and can make more nuanced and effective judgments.

I believe that these asymmetric core interests should not conflict. My hope is for harmony, which is why my call is for "asymmetric harmony" to help facilitate relations. Perhaps recognizing the reality of the asymmetry and the need for the harmony can transform thinking.

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