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APRIL 13, 2006

**Asia Insight**

By Wenran Jiang

## Watchful and Wary: China's Hu Visits Bush

China and the U.S. are both concerned about the protocol of Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Washington. The details speak volumes

Chinese President Hu Jintao's Apr. 20 visit to the United States has generated much discussion about the present and future state of U.S.-China relations. Critics charge that it's a waste of time to argue over whether to call the tour a "state visit" or what kind of official reception Hu should get as the head of the Chinese state. They worry such trivial things will overshadow more important business in the bilateral relationship. But the devil is in the details, and the details of Washington's handling of the Chinese leader's coming say quite a bit about the U.S. attitude toward a rising China.

President Bush has put many U.S. complaints on the agenda. The U.S. trade deficit with the Middle Kingdom ballooned to a little more than \$200 billion in 2005. Beijing is manipulating its currency, and the yuan is undervalued by as much as 40%, some economists contend. Low-priced Chinese goods are flooding the U.S. market, taking away manufacturing jobs. Then there are the huge losses of U.S. revenues in China due to persistent piracy of Western intellectual-property rights.

Finishing off the list are Beijing's close ties with oil-producing countries that pose security and proliferation concerns to Americans, China's spotty human rights record, and the desire for Beijing to play a bigger role in the nuclear deadlock with North Korea and Iran.

**IMAGE CONSCIOUS.** The Chinese agenda, by comparison, is less complicated. Beijing wants Washington's reassurance that it opposes Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian's independence plan. China also expects some credit for rolling out the check book in a bid to pacify trade concerns in the U.S. After all, China has agreed to import U.S. beef and medical devices, load all PCs sold in the mainland with legal software, and buy \$16.2 billion worth of contracts for Boeing jets, Motorola networking gear, and other U.S. goods.

And above all, the Chinese delegation wants some respect -- and a high-profile reception -- in the U.S. It is important for Hu politically back home, and for the international image of this ascending economic power abroad. The White House, however, is not planning an elaborate diplomatic production compared to the usual standards of big-power summitry. Hu will receive full military honors with a 21-gun salute at his arrival ceremony, but this is not being considered a "state visit" by the Americans.

There will be no formal dinner or state banquet, as Beijing would like. The official excuse may be that President Bush doesn't like formalities, but the real reasons are clear: The Bush Administration does not want to appear to be courting top Chinese while there is strong anti-Chinese sentiment on Capitol Hill and some fear of a rising China among ordinary Americans. It may also reflect that Washington doubts China is really serious about making progress on the range of tough bilateral issues that matter most to the Bush Administration.

**PERCEPTION PROBLEMS.** The Chinese likely will be bitter about this. After all, Hu hosted a state banquet last year when Bush visited Beijing. To Chinese leaders, the U.S. lack of reciprocity is more than a matter of broken protocol or domestic political bickering. It is seen as a slap in Hu's face. It also cuts to a deeper issue, from Beijing's perspective. It suggests that Washington doesn't fundamentally acknowledge the legitimacy of China's authoritarian Communist government.

China, despite its growing economic clout and changes in other areas, is still a one-party state. The Bush Administration, with all its own problems, still wants to be perceived as a champion for democratic change around the world. So in the U.S. mindset several mutually contradictory images of the rising dragon coexist:

While China is a vast market for U.S. companies, and Washington's deficit spending is made possible by Beijing's continuous purchase of U.S. treasury bills, it is also an economic competitor that may take over the U.S. dominance of world commerce in the near future.

While Beijing is a "stakeholder" in world affairs that may help U.S. interests in such cases as the North Korean nuclear stand-off, the Chinese military is expanding and may soon challenge the U.S. military's worldwide supremacy as a strategic competitor.

While the Bush Administration's drive to democratize the Middle East has run into serious problems, the idea that an authoritarian state like China can be both economically successful and internationally respected is in sharp contrast to the current opinion projected by the U.S. in the Middle East and elsewhere.

**BIGGER PICTURE.** There will be no short-term reconciliations of these split images, thus the U.S.-China policy will be structurally affected by the debates about the different roles China plays, largely depending on where each one sits on a particular issue at a given time. Washington must be studied and sophisticated in its approach to China, and there are some signs that this is starting to happen. Relations are far more complicated than the black-and-white portrayal of China as communist monster, eager to usurp U.S. economic prosperity and play a dominant role in international affairs.

It is important for Americans to realize these tensions within themselves so they don't get lost in the trees without looking at the forest, in dealing with China. It is important for the Chinese to be aware of these different dimensions of U.S. understanding of China so it does not treat the United States as a monolithic, imperialist hegemon that has no other interests but to forge a global alliance to contain China's rise.

**SOCIAL OCCASION.** So Hu's trip will be a platform upon which all these complex issues and psychological dramas play out in full. There will be ups and downs, tactical maneuvers from both sides to maximize their own interests, and heavy moments and light ones. If it's successful, at the end of the day, both countries will be talking, engaged, and managing their differences.

President Bush will not serve President Hu a banquet. And that is not necessarily a bad thing. Hu should be pleased that Bill Gates has invited him for dinner in his Seattle home. That will be a different type of engagement, and hopefully a relaxed experience for the important foreign trip Hu is about to take.

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