Moving forward on US-China relations

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Abstract: Although few were surprised by the lack of progress in the recent Bush-Hu summit in Washington, both the US and China need to start reconciling their definitions of "responsible stakeholder" before misperceptions and missed opportunities lead to a heightened chance of conflict.
Although the State Department was not quite willing to give the honor of a “State” visit to People’s Republic of China President Hu Jintao’s April 18-21 trip to the US (the visit was officially referred to as an “official visit,” at least on the US side), the first visit by a Chinese Head of State to the US in nine years was clearly a State visit by another name. Hu might not have been afforded a State dinner in Washington, but the pomp and circumstance surrounding his Alaskan Halibut lunch was an indication that the US clearly recognizes China as a rising power of monumental proportions whose economic, political, and environmental impact can neither be denied nor ignored.

Leading up to summit, it seemed that the list of issues President Bush would or should discuss with Hu, from the trade deficit to revaluing the Yuan to Iran to North Korea to religious freedom to energy consumption to human rights to free press to the environment to democratization, would take at least three weeks. Although some were hopeful that US-China relations would emerge stronger following Hu’s four day visit, most had low expectations for the amount of quantifiable progress the trip would yield. Tellingly enough, Bush and Hu only scheduled a ninety minute formal sit down working meeting. Also telling was the fact that Hu landed in Washington state before Washington DC, setting the tone for his visit as a business trip with a bit of preemptive political dialogue as fence mending, accompanied by photo ops on the White House lawn, on the side.

During the trip that brought Hu to a Boeing factory in Everett, Washington, Bill Gates’ mansion in Seattle, the White House, and Sprague Hall at Yale University, mixed in with high profile well wishers of the US-China relationship, anti-Chinese protesters, particularly of the Falun Gong persuasion, were successfully able to dim a good bit of the limelight, the most memorable being Wang Wenyi’s interruption of Hu’s remarks at his reception ceremony at the White House on the South Lawn. Apparently the Secret Service was more capable of keeping dangerous weapons out of the ceremony than dangerous words. With a few gaffes aside – perhaps the most innocent yet damaging being the mistaken announcement of the “Republic of China’s national anthem” (which actually refers to Taiwan) – as expected, little concrete progress was made on any of the political fronts.

All in all, the Bush-Hu summit was a week of triumphant diplomacy filled with delicate, eloquent speeches and artful choreography, but not much substance besides recommitting to...
continue to work together. In a politically masked game of chicken, neither the confident dragon nor the proud eagle proved willing to blink first; despite all the pomp and circumstance, there wasn’t a corresponding amount of energy put into focusing on perhaps the most important underlying concern in the developing US-China dialogue: a shared understanding of what, exactly, “responsible stakeholder” really means.

In his remarks in both Washington and New Haven, Hu added to the growing lexicon of US-Sino relations by repeatedly referring to the concept of developing a “mutually beneficial and win-win” relationship. The only problem is that even though the April visit marked the fifth meeting between Bush and Hu in just over a year, neither Washington nor Beijing seem to really agree on how to turn the thorny issues into win-win outcomes.

Although there is no shortage of sleek and sexy catch phrases both Washington and Beijing love to use when talking with each other or about each other – “peaceful rise,” “harmonious society,” “hedging strategy,” “congagement,” “responsible stakeholder,” “win-win” – perhaps Washington and Beijing are still talking past each other given their continuing lack of shared definitions for the same vocabulary. When Bush talks of “human rights,” he’s referring to Falung Gong and Zhao Yan; when Hu talks of “people’s rights,” he’s talking about “the value of serving the people, enriching them, nourishing them, and benefiting them” (remarks at Yale University, April 21, 2006). When Bush talks of the democracy and transparency, he’s talking about Jiang Lijun and not being able to google “democracy” (or Wang Wenyi, for that matter); when Hu talks of democracy, he asks, perhaps not so rhetorically, “what do you mean by a democracy?” (remarks from the Oval Office, April 20, 2006). Even though both leaders agreed to “continue to cooperate” on a wide range of issues, one has to wonder whether more is being lost in translation – intentionally or not – than is actually getting through.

Perhaps meeting just for the sake of meeting, for building and strengthening lines of communication is an accomplishment in and of itself, particularly when China-bashing has become a hobby of sorts for a growing number of influential politicians and commentators and when an apparently increasingly aggressive Defense Department is increasingly calling for more transparency in China’s military spending. Perhaps there needs to be more stable lines of communication between the leaders on both sides of the Pacific before either side can suggest moving forward to the elbow grease stage of reconciling shared future strategic objectives.

As both sides continue to posture and prepare for the dialogues that must one day come, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that the real talk needs to start soon. The ambiguous gray may be comfortable for the time being – and is surely preferable to running headfirst in the wrong direction – but I would suspect that whereas China would be happy to continue on its current “development first, politics later” trajectory, Washington may one day tire of tire of hoping
China will choose to do otherwise, particularly as China continues to support leaders in places such as the Sudan and Iran in order to be able to quench its thirst for the resources it needs in order to develop.

There is hope for optimism in the future of US-China relations, but there is also cause for concern over the hard discussions that haven’t seemed to really start despite the frequency of US-Chinese interchanges. The US needs to find a way to show China, not just tell China, that free trade, fair trade, IPR, human rights, and nonproliferation really are in its interests and not just American values that can be construed as leading to an inevitable “clash of civilizations”. Given the short fuses of the Taiwan, North Korea, and Japan issues in East Asia, that somehow or other seem to be getting even shorter, hopefully the next Bush-Hu summit will be remembered not just for its posturing and elegant choreography, or the small blemishes that tarnished it, but for its real progress on the deeper questions of future strategic objective alignment.