

Hail, President. Well Met

In small but important ways, Obama and Xi moved the needle on U.S.-China relations

FAREED ZAKARIA; COMMENTARY / WORLDVIEW; TIME June 24, 2013

WHILE WE WERE CONSUMED BY THE crises of the moment --- Turkey's riots, NSA snooping and Washington's "scandals" --- **something happened on June 7 and 8 that is potentially of more lasting importance.** The Presidents of the U.S. and China held their most significant and successful meeting in the decades. **It was a vital step forward in the crucial relationship --- between the world's superpower and its fastest-rising power --- that will shape the 21st century.**

The summit at Sunnylands, in California, was the result of months of preparation, led on by the American side by National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon. He explained to me the two teams agreed to a format that was a great break with the past: "Usually at meetings like these, each leader brings a set of talking points. This creates a format that highlights problems. **This was different: We didn't come in with a set of complaints. The leaders came with ideas about opportunities. It created a completely different discussion and dynamic.**

The two sides had eight hours of meetings, including 50 minutes of one-on-one talks between the two Presidents, with no aides other than their interpreters. The first session was devoted to the priorities of each leader. Xi Jinping's presentation made clear that the main focus of his agenda was domestic. He explained at length what he means when he talks about the "China Dream," his governing slogan, and what reforms he intends to pursue to achieve it. **In typical Chinese style he outlined long-term goals for his nation, for 2020 and for 2050. President OBAMA outlined his first-term achievements and his hopes for his second term.** The two then discussed the international scene and the challenges and opportunities it presented.

The conversation was far more informal than usual; it was even personal. In talking about poverty, Xi described his years of hardship during the Cultural Revolution. Obama talked about spending four

years as a boy in Indonesia at a time when the country was largely rural and poor. In the middle of the first night's dinner, the Chinese team surprised their hosts by bringing out Moutai, the famous (or infamous) sorghum-based liquor, for a special toast. Perhaps they thought it would help grease the summit; **Henry Kissinger is said to have told China's former supreme leader Deng Xiaoping, "I think if we drink enough Moutai, we can solve anything."**

While the purpose of the meeting was to build trust rather than produce a set of results, progress was made on specific issues. The Chinese already made one important shift in policy, long sought by the Americans, even before they got to California. A week before the summit, Xi told a North Korean envoy that his country had to re-engage in a diplomatic process whose goal was to rid Pyongyang of nuclear weapons. **Reflecting on the conversations at Sunnylands, Donilon told me, "On North Korea, China now sees the denuclearization of North Korea as its top goal."**

In the discussions on economics, contentious issues like cyberattacks came up, and each side stood its ground, but even here there was a search for opportunities for increased cooperation. **Obama pointed out to Xi that given China's vast resources of shale and America's leading-edge extraction technology, there was an opportunity for economic cooperation that would benefit both.** Xi had his own list of such opportunities, like Chinese investment to fund U.S. infrastructure projects.

AERIAS OF TENSION WERE DISCUSSED, INCLUDING China's relations with Japan, on which the Chinese were impassioned. **But the atmosphere was somewhat different this time.** In the past, Beijing has argued the Obama Administration's "pivot" to Asia looked to it like a strategy to contain China. **At this meeting, Donilon said, "the Chinese leaders made clear that they understood and appreciated America's historic role in Asia in providing stability."**

This is mostly rhetoric and atmospherics. "The true test of this summit will be in two or three or five years," Donilon acknowledged, "when this background goodwill has to get translated into specific actions on

both sides.” Clearly both sides will have to follow up in the years ahead. But it is a significant achievement to create goodwill and trust between two countries that are so different in so many dimensions and could easily become adversaries. **When historians write about China’s renaissance and America’s role in ensuring its peaceful rise,** they highlight the meetings between Richard Nixon and Zhou Enlai in 1972 and between Jimmy Carter and Deng in 1979. **If things go well, perhaps they will add to that list this meeting between Obama and XI in the California desert.**

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