Obama and U.S.-China Relations

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President Obama's four-day visit to China that has just ended was the longest and the most important segment of his first presidential trip to Asia, a trip that also included stops in Japan, Singapore and South Korea. The President's visit provides an excellent opportunity to review the recent historical development of U.S. relations with China, a rising global power. In February 1972, when Barack Obama was an eleven year-old schoolboy in Honolulu, President Richard Nixon made an historic visit to China that opened a new chapter in U.S.-China relations. When the Chinese Communists led by Mao Zedong came to power in 1949 after a bloody civil war, the U.S. viewed the new government of the People's Republic of China with hostility. That hostility was reciprocated by Mao Zedong who allied China with the Soviet Union. Washington sought to contain and isolate the revolutionary contagion that China represented through policies of diplomatic non-recognition and an economic embargo imposed during the Korean War. U.S. China relations settled into a Cold War pattern in which there was no trade, no tourism, no exchanges, no media reporting from inside, and no meaningful diplomatic contacts. China was like the far side of the moon. Richard Nixon, a conservative Republican, was a tough-minded but visionary realist who understood that China could not forever be ignored or its communist government wished away. In the 1970s, the U.S. and China initially came together in joint opposition to the perceived threat of Soviet expansionism. (China had long since broken with its former Soviet ally.) After Nixon's opening to China, Americans and Chinese
rediscovered each other and contacts in fields such as education, science and technology, cultural exchanges, tourism, and trade began to multiply. In 1979 formal diplomatic relations were established between the U.S. and China. At this time, China was still a miserably poor and backward even though nuclear-armed country. After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, his successors adopted a policy of opening and reform that acknowledged China's weakness and sought foreign investment, technology, and trade in order to close the huge gap between China and the developed world. This strategy worked. In the course of a generation, with considerable help from abroad China transformed itself into the world's workshop and a major trading partner of the United States, Japan, and Europe. Hundreds of millions of Chinese lifted themselves from poverty. Many Americans incorrectly assumed that economic reform in China would bring in its train political liberalization or even democracy. Instead, China's communist rulers jettisoned communism, but held firmly onto power. They continue to reject any and all forms of real democracy, condemning it as an alien Western intrusion despite the fact that democracy has taken root in India, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and elsewhere in Asia. China is a modernizing global power with interests in every continent and a say in every issue of global as well as regional importance. Its military power is growing, too, though it is still far behind the U.S. in its capacity to project power outside of its own land and sea borders. Unlike the former USSR, today's China is not directly challenging the United States for global leadership. Yet neither is it willing to accept U.S. leadership uncritically and it has amply demonstrated its readiness to employ its economic clout in Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere to advance its national interests. In that respect it is behaving like emerging great powers in the past though it is less likely to resort to war as a means of achieving its objectives. As Americans, we must learn the hard lesson that we cannot change China even though we find its authoritarian and repressive
political system extremely distasteful. Still, we can and should continue to press China to do much better on human rights even as we put our own house in order. Internationally, China is a rising power that must be treated as an equal by the United States if the world is to manage successfully such urgent issues as global climate change, poverty, disease, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation. These are just some of the items on the agenda that President Obama brought with him to China. Others relate to regional and bilateral U.S.-China relations such as trade, intellectual property rights, military-to-military ties, Taiwan, and regional security. Presidential visits merely highlight important issues. The hard work of hammering out agreements is done by legions of lower-ranking officials who work outside the spotlight and who measure success incrementally. Our own security, prosperity, and the well-being of the planet ultimately depend on whether the U.S. and China, two of the leading world powers, can find common ground on key issues even as each pursues its own national interests.

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