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REVIEW & OUTLOOK | JANUARY 18, 2011

Dealing With an Assertive China

If Beijing wants to be treated like an equal, it should act like one.

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When Robert Gates met Hu Jintao in Beijing last week, the Defense Secretary raised the very public test of a new stealth fighter jet that coincided with his visit. The Chinese President expressed surprise at the news, asking his military colleagues whether it was true.

China watchers interpret this in two ways, neither one reassuring. Either the Chinese military took the initiative to embarrass their American guest without the knowledge of the civilian leadership. Or Mr. Hu was complicit in the unprecedented and clearly deliberate leak of the new plane's maiden flight to send Washington a message: China has the muscle to start pushing the U.S. out of Asia.

Whichever the case, the fighter test is consistent with an emerging pattern of aggressive Chinese behavior, and it sets a tone for Mr. Hu's state visit to Washington this week. In the two years since President Obama came to office, China has picked naval fights with the U.S., Indonesia and Japan; openly bullied Norway in anticipation of Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Peace Prize; provided diplomatic cover and proliferation aid to North Korea; conducted a cyberattack on Google; and imprisoned foreign businessmen on trumped-up espionage charges. It has also made claims to the Yellow and South China Seas based on preposterous interpretations of long-standing international conventions.

What explains this turn after three decades of relatively benign behavior on the international stage? Increasing economic confidence and clout—magnified by the current economic troubles of Japan, Europe and the U.S.—is surely a part of it. Of course that clout was gained in substantial part from a free-trading global economic order secured by American military might and underwritten by American dollars. China need no longer be a free rider in this system, and it has earned a right to shape it going forward. But it ought to do so as a responsible stakeholder and not as a capricious spoiler. On the evidence of the past two years, it is leaning in the latter direction.



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Hu Jintao

That's not to say the U.S. is blameless for the general deterioration in relations. The Obama Administration went too far out of its way early on to avoid speaking about Beijing's human rights violations. But it has followed the Bush Administration in berating Beijing for its currency policy, as if the Chinese don't have cause to question the Federal Reserve's stewardship of the dollar. President Obama has also deliberately picked trade fights with Beijing, to which the Chinese proved only too willing to retaliate.

Yet these kinds of policy frictions aren't unprecedented. What is new and troubling is China's willingness to challenge the security status quo without much apparent concern for the world's

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reaction. That's especially true in its own neighborhood, where its provocations and bad faith (especially its defense of North Korea's aggression) are leading Japan, Taiwan and South Korea to strengthen security ties with the U.S. China has also gone far to undermine U.S. and even United Nations efforts to stop a nuclear breakout by Iran and other global rogues.

We're more sympathetic to China's efforts to revise the rules of the global currency system, which Mr. Hu dismissed on Sunday as "the product of the past" in response to written questions from this newspaper. But it's not clear that China has given much thought to what a new system would look like, except that the U.S. dollar would have a much smaller role. This agitation betrays a naivete about how much the current system has allowed China to develop, and how a new framework would likely prevent China from running large trade surpluses.

All of these moves are assertions of Chinese nationalism, which has become, along with economic growth, a pillar of the ruling Communist Party's claims to legitimacy. Historians of China may note that such nationalism is bound to play a role in a country that sees itself as only now emerging from two centuries of subservience to barbarian interlopers. But China's new truculence is once again raising concern that Beijing is intent on dominating its region and destabilizing the world order, much as the Kaiser's Germany did a century ago.

How should the U.S. respond? Nearly four decades of engagement with Beijing have yielded important benefits for both sides, including the rise of hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty and the mutual benefits of a robust trading partnership. The U.S. would be less affluent today without Chinese goods and markets. And China's rise could not continue if U.S. policy makers came to see economic ties with China as a zero-sum game.

For President Obama the challenge of this week's summit is to persuade his guest that the U.S. will continue to encourage China's economic rise but is also determined to block China's power plays in its neighborhood and beyond. A China that understands that to be treated as an equal it must behave like one is a country whose progress will not be obstructed.

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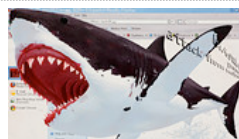
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