

## **Of dinners and deals: the different diplomatic styles of China and the US make negotiation all the more necessary**

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Comment\Insight & Opinion

CHINA-US RELATIONS

**Tom Plate**

*Tom Plate says relentless engagement, rather than aggressive containment, offers China and the US the best chance of achieving their ends*

All's well that ends well? Start with this: guess who's been coming to dinner? In the otherwise Diet Coke blue-jeans Barack Obama years, a hip span showcasing the fewest number of formal White House state dinners of any administration since Harry Truman, only China has been graced with two prandial extravaganzas - just one for Japan, just one for anyone else. It's been a double dollop of dinner-party diplomacy for China. Let us all - including the anti-US faction in Beijing - dwell on this.

Each of the two state White House mega events for China - the first in 2011 with Hu Jintao when he was president, then last week with President Xi Jinping - produced results, which, mixed or unmixed, were better than no results. Right now, the US media is picking holes in the cyber warfare agreement - but, really, who understands this problem fully? Notably, the Xi government's commitment to climate control and global de-warming increases with every diplomatic event.



Michelle Obama, Hu Jintao and Barack Obama before their 2011 state dinner. Photo: AP

Perhaps Chinese people don't like breathing filthy air any more than anyone else. Western media critics continually - if correctly - point out that China's anti-earth emissions are double those of the US; but with its economy under stress in many sectors, and its population more than three times that of the US, how could it be otherwise? (Maybe China should stick with tea farming and forget all about modernisation?)

If Xi returned home believing his diplomatic venture was a success - it was - in part that's because he is Chinese, the Western business suit notwithstanding. What counts for him and his government is not so much the trip's actuarial pluses and minuses but the very fact that it took place - twice. Chinese needs are different from the American.

Americans go for quarterly reports and five-year plans that tend to get scrambled every 18 months. By contrast, the bottom line for the Chinese is harder to achieve but more enduring: they want to get totally re-established as what their country centuries ago was, before (in their eyes) the rest of the world was walking all over them.



Qian Qichen (left) and James Baker, whose views of diplomacy were very different. Photo: AFP

The American leans towards (to quote a book title) "the art of the deal". Specific commitments of time must yield specific payoffs; otherwise the effort is seen to have been a flop. Some patently obvious metric assesses the result; computations are binary. This can annoy a true Chinese. When James Baker was secretary of state under president George H.W. Bush, he had his admirers, but not Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen, who would cringe whenever his US counterpart would approach him with "let's make a deal". His view was that Sino-US relations belonged, by their nature, in a higher realm of being than, say, organising a stock swap or pricing a used car.

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Relentless relating between China and the US is an end in itself, because what else might lead to bilateral bonding? Not pushing it is to risk accepting, inadvertently or not, a new cold war - or worse. Sure, not everyone in Beijing thinks America is as great as America thinks it is; and sure, US domestic political pressures will limit the options of any president. And - let us note - China's leaders somehow need to ignore every bit of the inevitable anti-China campaign rhetoric for the idiocy that it will represent. Trying to contain China in its own backyard - as if to slap onto such a vast people and civilisation an ankle bracelet of geopolitical house arrest - is a fool's errand. What Chinese government (Communist or not) would allow it? Smart Americans know that.



Peng Liyuan, Michelle Obama, Xi Jinping and Barack Obama at the most recent formal state dinner earlier this month. Photo: AP

A mutual commitment to aggressive engagement has a far better chance of success than one of ill-conceived aggressive containment. At a minimum, it shows reciprocal respect rather than enmity. But where is the wise American voice that can convince the quick-hit American mentality that such is the best way? How can anyone in China really believe the path will not be a lot harder if America goes totally sour?

Consider the issue of the South and East China seas. News reports said there was no progress, the Chinese were obdurate, etc; but the very fact that both sides are working on this mess without stalking away in a showy huff suggests adults, not children, are at the negotiating table. The goal for Sino-US diplomacy is not to trump the other with some headlining win-lose gambit, but to work together to create some enduring liveable space in which both can find oxygen for their core needs.

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This goes for both sides: if Beijing moves arrogantly, the Americans will be back in the barracks of Subic Bay, a non-sandy patch as big as Singapore - and rather closer to China than, say, Hawaii. And if the US moves arrogantly, it may find more of its allies tacking towards the pragmatic British position, leaving Washington looking petulant and old-fashioned.

The Philippines and others are alarmed by Chinese naval expansionism and seek relief from an international tribunal based on the UN Law of the Seas. But Beijing points out that the convention is too vague to be definitive. With contrary legal positions hardening, a smarter approach is needed: perhaps a grand bargain for Asian resource sharing. The path to that historic, needed settlement won't be found in "the art of the deal". China doesn't work that way, and in its most careful diplomacy the US doesn't - or shouldn't - either. What all sides need is a persistent process of relentless engagement that offers everyone something valuable and no one party everything under the sky. That would be real deal-making.

Let's say it again: all's well that ends well.

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