



Hu Jintao's State Visit to the United States: An attempt to put the Sino-US narrative in place

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Summary

Hu Jintao's state visit to the United States attests to the significance of the Sino-US relationship in global politics. While China is of critical importance to the United States for many reasons, the US too has high priority in Chinese foreign policy. While the Chinese president's trip concluded with a joint statement and the signing of trade and investment deals, it achieved little in terms of addressing pressing global problems and bilateral issues. The main purpose Hu Jintao's trip was to stabilise the sensitive relationship and reiterate the two countries' importance to each other. Issues such as Tibet, human rights and currency revaluation remain major irritants between China and the United States even as they have become more interdependent than at any point in history.

Contextualising the Visit

The Chinese President's four-day visit to the United States of America commencing January 19, 2011 came after a year that was marked by bilateral disputes and tensions. Though the presidents of the two countries acknowledged the long-term benefits of working together, the visit clearly failed to chart out a framework or a working strategy on regional and global issues. But it did help to ease the mistrust and tension between these two global powers, at least at the diplomatic level.

President Hu Jintao's visit marked the 40th anniversary of Sino-US rapprochement. The Chinese media described it as a "landmark visit" that would draw a blueprint for future Sino-US relations. Following the Nixon visit and normalisation of diplomatic relations in 1979, Sino-US relations were marked by periods of uncertainty (1977, 1980–1982), progressive interaction (1978–1980, 1983–1988), and hostility following the Tiananmen crisis in 1989.¹ In his speech in Washington, Hu Jintao urged that both countries needed to abandon "zero-sum cold war mentality" to enhance what he called practical cooperation on a wide range of issues.

Mutual Perception

In the opinion of Chinese officials and academia, Hu's visit was expected to dispel the spectre of the China threat and steer China-US relations towards positive, cooperative and comprehensive development.² In contrast, US expectations were mixed. American experts on China³ considered the visit to be timely and crucial, given strained bilateral relations in the past two years. Some viewed the visit as an opportunity for the two countries to discuss their differences and acknowledge the need to jointly address major regional and international issues; others were of the view that given the challenges in Sino-US relations a strategic cooperative partnership would be very difficult to develop.⁴ Some others pointed out that global concerns such as piracy along the African coast, Iran's nuclear programme, the sluggish US economy, the heated Korean peninsula and climate change would give a boost to bilateral cooperation.⁵

¹ David L. Shambaugh, *Beautiful Imperialist: China perceives America: 1972–1990*, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 5.

² "Hu's visit to map out blueprint for Sino-US ties," Opinion, *Xinhua*, 16 January 2011, http://www.chinaethnicgroups.com/china/2011huvisistsus/2011-01/16/content_11861519.htm (accessed 22 January 2011).

³ David Lampton, Director of SAIS, Johns Hopkins University, Zbigniew Kazimierz Brzezinski, former US security advisor and Stapleton Roy, former US ambassador to China.

⁴ Feng Xim, "US think tank member says 'China US military relations lag far behind'," *China Daily*, 10 January 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/video/2011-01/10/content_11820504.htm (accessed 22 January 2011).

⁵ Wu Jiao, "Landmark trip looks to future," *China Daily*, 18 January 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011huvisistsus/201101/18/content_11870010_2.htm (accessed 22 January 2011).

The visit concluded with a joint press conference, a joint statement and the signing of trade deals worth \$600 million. The joint statement “reaffirmed their commitment to the November 2009 US-China joint-statement” and addressed major international issues, but was silent on Af-Pak and terrorism. The US wanted to steer clear of any mention of India or promoting India-Pakistan dialogue in this document after a strong protest from New Delhi on an earlier occasion when such wordings were used in 2009. According to a news analysis, “While US wanted to step back from such language, this time keeping in mind India’s concern, the assessment is that China would have had Pakistan’s interests in sight.”⁶ The perceptible warmth in the reception accorded to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when he visited the USA in November 2009 was missing in the reception accorded to President Hu. As Obama’s press secretary Robert Gibbs said on the eve of Hu’s visit, “India enjoys a very personal relationship with the United States, and has through the administrations of President Clinton, President Bush, and now President Obama; all taking important steps in visiting that country.”⁷

During their talks, Barack Obama was categorical in raising the issue of North Korea. The Chinese president in turn cautioned the US to stay away from Tibet, and warned that otherwise bilateral ties would be greatly affected. This warning came a day after Obama asked Hu to talk to representatives of the Dalai Lama to resolve the Tibet issue. Hu reiterated that Taiwan and Tibet represent the core interests of his country and pointed to the national sentiment of 1.3 billion Chinese. In his address to the US-China Business Council, Hu noted that “A review of the history of our relations tells us that China-US relations will enjoy smooth and steady growth when the two countries handle well issues involving each other’s major interests, otherwise our relations will face a constant trouble, or even tensions.”

At their private dinner too, President Obama asked President Hu to take a harder line towards North Korea. This assumed significance given that Beijing has still not condemned North Korea for allegedly torpedoing a South Korean warship. It is significant, however, that China for the first time joined the US in publicly expressing concern over the North Korean uranium enrichment plant. It was also surprising to note that Hu Jintao, at the White House press conference, expressed the view that China recognises and respects the universality of human rights.⁸ This was a palpable shift for a government that has staged a two-year crackdown on internal dissent.

⁶ Promod Dhal Samant, “US-China statement steers clear of Af-Pak, war on terror,” *Indian Express*, 22 January 2011.

⁷ “Unlike Manmohan, Chinese President Gets Cold Reception in US,” *Deccan Herald*, January 20, 2011, at <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/130831/unlike-manmohan-chinese-president-gets.html> (accessed on January 26, 2011).

⁸ Michael Wines, “Subtle Signs of Progress in U.S.-China Relations,” *The New York Times*, January 19, 2011, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/20/world/asia/20assess.html> (accessed on January 26, 2011).

Explaining the Joint Statement

The US-China joint statement can be broken down into four main themes: political issues; science and economy; security; and, human rights.

Political Issues

The Tibet and Taiwan issues were raised by US law makers when Hu met them on Capitol Hill. Members of the congress zeroed in on human rights and trade to underscore the huge gaps between Beijing and Washington. "Chinese leaders have a responsibility to do better, and the United States has a responsibility to hold them to account," said John Boehner, the new Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, after meeting Hu. Rick Larsen, the Democratic co-chair of the bi-partisan US-China Working Group in the House, said, "China must get serious about improving US access to its large domestic market...."⁹ Neither Boehner nor senate majority leader Harry Reed attended the White House dinner for Hu. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell skipped the visit entirely. House minority leader Nancy Pelosi, a strong protagonist of Tibet and Dalai Lama, however, attended the state dinner.

The issue of Taiwan was also referred to in the joint statement. It stated that while Taiwan is at the core of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, both sides must be careful about this issue and understand the dynamics of 'One-China' policy and the three U.S.-China Joint Communiqués.¹⁰ This was a reiteration of what was said in the previous joint statement issued in 2009, in which "China emphasized that the Taiwan issue concerns China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and expressed the hope that the United States will honour its relevant commitments and appreciate and support the Chinese side's position on this issue. The United States stated that it follows its one China policy and abides by the principles of the three U.S.-China joint communiqués."¹¹ While the future status of Taiwan remains unclear, what is indeed clear is that the issue of the identity and the political future of Taiwan have lost their importance for the United States. Issues that matter now are US arms sales and the economic cooperation framework to increase economic interaction across the Taiwan Strait.

In the global context, China and the United States agreed to fully support the peace process between North and South Korea, and the full and effective implementation of the Sudan

⁹ "China's Hu faces human rights questions," January 21, 2011, at <http://www.businessspectator.com.au/bs.nsf/Article/WRAPUP-5-Chinas-Hu-faces-US-lawmakers-in-bid-to-bo-DAKJB?OpenDocument&src=mp> (accessed on January 25, 2011).

¹⁰ *U.S.-China Joint Statement*, The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, January 19, 2011, Washington D.C., at <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2011/January/20110119172633su0.7791799.html?CP.rss=true#> (accessed on January 26, 2011).

¹¹ *U.S.-China Joint Statement*, The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, November 17, 2009, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-china-joint-statement> (accessed on January 26, 2011).

comprehensive peace agreement. The question now is about the role China will play in future negotiations and peace talks between the various groups in Sudan, given its large stakes in this oil-rich region. Stability in the region is in China's interest because this would enable China to enhance its economic diplomacy. China and the US also discussed the prospects of working together in the Asia-Pacific region, which was meant to dispel theories about China's hegemony and US containment of China.

Science and Economy

Throughout the visit President Hu attempted to give the impression that US and Chinese economic interests were largely aligned. A number of trade deals were signed, though no clarity emerged on issues like currency revaluation, trade deficit, intellectual property rights, and greater access to China's markets. On the currency issue, Elizabeth Economy pointed out that, as expected, China will go its own way in line with its national interest.¹² The Chinese government has for long faced sharp criticism from the United States over its exchange rate policy, which the US government and business claim keeps the yuan undervalued, thus giving China an unfair trade advantage.¹³ China's stance on the matter is that it will help it tame inflation at home. Expressing concern over the future of the dollar and currency exchange rates, Hu made a veiled criticism of the US Federal currency reserve,¹⁴ and drew attention to the yuan's increasing role in cross-border trade and investment while acknowledging that making it a full fledged international currency "will be a fairly long process".¹⁵ China's firm position on the currency issue emanates from the economic confidence it has gained in recent years, especially after the global financial crisis, from which it emerged relatively unscathed and also from its crucial global role in tackling the recent downturn.

The American business community has also expressed its disapproval of China's record on intellectual property rights, government decision-making and discriminatory policies. Though the joint statement mentioned joint efforts to strengthen macroeconomic communication and cooperation, it failed to arouse American optimism on these issues.

¹² Stern Andrew and Christopher Buckley, "Hu's U.S. visit sets new tone but tensions remain," Reuters.com, 21 January 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE70H07Z20110121> (accessed 23 January 2011).

¹³ "President Hu Jintao's Visit to the U.S.: Key issues to watch," CBI, January 2011, at <http://cbi.typepad.com/files/hu-us-visit—key-issues-jan-2011.pdf> (accessed on January 25, 2011).

¹⁴ "The current international currency system is the product of the past," Hu said. Excerpts from interview, *Washington Post*, 16 January 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/16/AR2011011603532.html?sid=ST2011011404809> (accessed 23 January 2011).

¹⁵ Andrew Browne, "Hu Highlights Need for U.S.-China Cooperation, Questions Dollar," *Wall Street Journal*, 17 January 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703551604576085803801776090.html> (accessed 23 January 2011).

In the field of space exploration, a Chinese visit to NASA did not materialise in 2010. But after the productive visit of the NASA administrator to China in 2010, China was re-invited to visit NASA headquarters and other NASA facilities in 2011. The China-US rhetoric on increasing dialogue and cooperation in the space arena however needs to be seen against the background of their distrust of each other's intentions.

Security

There was no evidence of a substantive shift in the approaches of the two countries on the issue of North Korea. Both have a common interest in maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, especially since the region is a potential flashpoint. There is an ongoing Chinese policy debate on North Korea, which reflects China's strategic policy dilemma - whether to work more closely with the United States, South Korea and Japan or to reflexively defend North Korea. It will be interesting to see which view gains prominence amidst heightened international pressure.¹⁶

The joint statement reiterated the two countries' commitment to seeking a comprehensive and long-term solution that would restore international confidence in the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme and called for the full implementation of all relevant UN security council resolutions. Ahead of the US-China talks, two US senators had accused China of violating UN sanctions against Iran, and said that Congress would go after Chinese companies if they did not adhere to the sanctions.¹⁷ However, the joint statement and China's rhetoric regenerated hopes among US policymakers that the Hu-Obama summit would instil trust and cooperation and China would abide by its commitments.

On the issue of their military relationship, the joint statement referred to the recent successful visit of Secretary of Defence Robert Gates to China, but it failed to address the issue of the PLA's testing of a new stealth fighter which, according to American military experts, carries the potential to threaten US naval and military capabilities. Gates' visit to China was aimed at arriving at some kind of an understanding with the PLA and to persuade Chinese military leaders to cut back on their military modernisation programme.¹⁸ However, Chinese military leaders did not appear to be interested in developing trust based on military-to-military ties with the US, though President Hu as the chief of China's military commission expressed much interest in developing and

¹⁶ Elizabeth C. Economy, "Hu and Obama: What did it all mean?," Council on Foreign Relations, 20 January 2011, <http://blogs.cfr.org/asia/2011/01/20/hu-and-obama-what-did-it-all-mean/> (accessed 22 January 2011).

¹⁷ "Obama, Hu for implementation of UN resolutions against Iran," *Deccan Herald*, 25 January 2011, <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/130656/obama-hu-implementation-un-resolutions.html> (accessed 25 January 2011).

¹⁸ "Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates Warns China Over J-20 Stealth fighter Jet," DTN News-Defense News, 8 January 2011, <http://defensewarnewsupdates.blogspot.com/2011/01/dtn-news-defense-news-defense-secretary.html> (accessed 24 January 2011).

bolstering such a relationship. This underscores the deep divide between the PLA and the civilian leadership and also puts Hu's power and influence within the PLA under question.

Human Rights

Although economic and trade-related issues occupied most of Obama's attention, he also gently pressed China to make progress on human rights. While carefully avoiding any mention of specific issues like Tibet, Falun Gong and the jailed Nobel laureate, the US president focused on the nitty-gritty of the cash register that dominates US-China engagements.¹⁹ Ahead of Hu's visit, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had urged China to address its human rights problems, which would enable it to grow in a peaceful and stable manner and help it become a constructive partner for the rest of the world.²⁰ Despite wide protests and criticism by members of Congress of China's human rights record, including political repression,²¹ President Hu's comments²² on China's position on human rights issues baffled human rights advocates to a large extent. While the joint statement contained the rhetoric of commitment to promote and protect human rights, Hu made it clear in his comments that China would address the agenda of human rights necessarily within the Chinese context.

China's global monopoly on rare earth minerals has raised alarm in the US, especially because the Chinese government reduced its rare earth exports by over 70 per cent in the second half of 2010. Rare earth minerals²³ are critical components in the development and manufacture of some of the most advanced and cutting-edge technologies. The joint statement did not make any reference to the issue, which again reflects China's tough negotiating position.

¹⁹ Chidanand Rajghatta, "Who's Hu is no joke now; assertive China strides into US," *Times of India*, 18 January 2011, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/Whos-Hu-is-no-joke-now-assertive-China-strides-into-US/articleshow/7310650.cms#ixzz1BqcsvNGk> (accessed 22 January 2011).

²⁰ Shaun Tandon, "Clinton pushes China on rights before the visit," YahooNews, 14 January 2011, http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20110114/wl_afp/uschinadiplomacy_20110114204107 (accessed 25 January 2011).

²¹ Note China's highly negative reaction to the Nobel Peace Prize award last year to imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo on 8 October 2010: "China furious after dissident Liu Xiaobo wins Nobel Peace Prize," *Japan Today*, 8 October 2010, <http://www.japantoday.com/category/world/view/chinese-dissident-liu-xiaobo-wins-nobel-peace-prize> (accessed 20 January 2011).

²² Hu insisted that China had made "enormous progress" on human rights but acknowledged "a lot still needs to be done," although he gave no specifics. "Obama presses China's Hu on currency, rights," Reuters.com, <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-54267120110119> (accessed 24 January 2011).

²³ Keith Bradsher, "China Seizes Rare Earth Mine Areas," *New York Times*, 20 January 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/21/business/global/21rare.html> (accessed 23 January 2011).

The course of the relationship

The joint statement and joint press conference gave the impression that there has been diplomatic smoothing of frictions, after the recent flare-up of tensions over issues like North Korea, trade and investment, protectionism, and cyber hacking. But nothing clear and concrete was achieved on the currency issue, human rights, military ties, or the situation in the Korean peninsula. How far this will contribute to stabilising US-China relations in the coming months will be interesting to watch. Hu's visit was highly fruitful for addressing challenges of energy and climate change, and a consensus between China and the US has been achieved on these issues.

While a section of the US business community is happy with the opening up of China's markets and the signing of trade and investment deals,²⁴ apprehensions have been raised by others about how far the opening of Chinese markets to more US exports would actually create jobs for American workers. In this context, Obama and Hu exchanged meaningless pledges of cooperation and sugary language was used to persuade China to alter its policies.²⁵ On the currency front, Assistant Treasury Secretary Charles Collins commented that Beijing has kept the yuan "substantially undervalued".²⁶ The difference persists as nothing was achieved on the issue.²⁷ However, some parts of the US business community hold the view that rather than getting distracted by the currency dispute, it is time to engage China on a broad range of economic issues.

Views of the US Strategic Community

Those who anticipated immediate results from the visit were dismissive of its achievements while others perceived a subtle but key shift in China's approach. Senator John F. Kerry

²⁴ "I'm confident that bilateral China-U.S. investment in the next year or two will grow even faster and help the United States with employment growth," Chinese Commerce Minister Chen Deming told the business forum as more deals were signed. "The bottom line is that improved implementation of China's WTO (World Trade Organization) commitments will lead to a more balanced trade relationship," U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke told the Chicago business group as the deals were signed. See, Andrew Stern and Christopher Buckley, "Hu's US Visit sets new tone but tensions remain," *Reuters*, January 21, 2011, at <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE70H07Z20110121?i=2> (accessed on January 26, 2011).

²⁵ Robert J. Samuelson, "China's new world order demands stronger US response," *Washington Post*, 24 January 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2011/01/23/AR2011012302895.html> (accessed 24 January 2011). Also note, Alan Tonelson of the U.S. Business and Industry Council, a group of manufacturers, says US policy verges on "appeasement".

²⁶ "Lawmakers press China's Hu on North Korea, rights," *Reuters*, 20 January 2011, <http://latestchina.com/article/?rid=28296> (accessed 24 January 2011).

²⁷ "On the currency issue, President Hu gave nothing, but no one should have expected a breakthrough," said Elizabeth Economy, a China expert at the Council on Foreign Relations. "President Hu Jintao's Visit to the U.S.: Key issues to watch," CBI, January 2011, at <http://cbi.typepad.com/files/hu-us-visit-key-issues-jan-2011.pdf> (accessed on January 25, 2011).

(D-Mass.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, characterised this visit as 'highly successful' and as marking a major breakthrough in the US-China relationship. Talking highly of Hu's assurances, he commented that China would adopt a pragmatic approach and play responsible role in conflict areas and work towards the promotion of universal human rights.²⁸ In line with the Democrats, the Republicans equally felt that progress has been made in Sino-US relationship, though they were also sceptical on the issue of China's human rights.²⁹

Views of the Chinese strategic community

The Chinese strategic community however views the visit as having been highly successful. Acknowledging the differences between the two countries, it believes that problems would continue to show up as both countries get closer and that this can be resolved by cultivating strategic mutual trust and pursuing a win-win relationship in a positive and constructive manner.³⁰ Given the nature of the Chinese political system and society, the Chinese strategic community abstained from critically evaluating the different positions adopted by Hu Jintao on sensitive issues like human rights, North Korea, Taiwan or Tibet.³¹

The Chinese media praised the visit as a diplomatic "masterstroke" in US-China relations³² and downplayed the human rights issue. On Beijing's currency policy, the media argued that the US as the world's main reserve currency issuer should take responsibility to avoid misuse of the dollar, which causes global economic and financial disparity and inflation.

²⁸ Paul Kane and Felicia Sonmez, "Hu Jintao meets with lawmakers, hears concerns human rights," *Washington Post*, 20 January 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2011/01/19/AR2011011905092_pf.html (accessed 22 January 2011).

²⁹ *Ibid.* Rep. Charles W. Boustany Jr. (R-La.) said, "It was a somewhat evasive answer". Also see "There's a certain amount of irony that a Nobel Peace Prize winner should be hosting dinner and last year's . . . Nobel Prize winner is under house arrest," McCain said.

³⁰ Fu Mengzi, "China and US: mapping out path ahead," *China Daily*, 24 January 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/thinktank/2011-01/24/content_11903687.htm (accessed 23 January 2011).

³¹ The Chinese side seemed more content with the outcome, with Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai calling the visit "a great success", according to the *Washington Post*. "Hu Jintao's visit to US a great success," 21 January 2011, <http://en.radio86.com/world-viewpoints/hu-jintaos-visit-us-great-success> (accessed 23 January 2011).

³² "A historic masterstroke of China-U.S. diplomacy with global significance," *Xinhua Net*, 22 January 2011, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/indepth/2011-01/20/c_13699437.htm (accessed 22 January 2011). "Hu's fruitful visit opens new chapter on China-US relation," *Global Times*, 23 January 2011, <http://china.globaltimes.cn/diplomacy/2011-01/615647.html> (accessed 23 January 2011). "Hu's visit sketches blueprint for China-US ties," *Global Times*, 23 January 2011, <http://china.globaltimes.cn/diplomacy/2011-01/615666.html> (accessed 23 January 2011).

An Assessment

The Sino-US relationship stands out as one of the best examples in Cold War history, where pragmatism and not ideological affinity brought about rapprochement between two countries which had both competitive and complementary interests. Though the bipolar Cold War ended long ago, this complex bilateral relationship still continues to be driven by a high degree of pragmatism, with both countries needing each other to advance their interests even if they differ in their approaches, and to enhance their influence at the regional and global levels. What underlies this is their quest to dominate the world as global powers. This uneven relationship, marked by twists and turns, can be further interpreted as an unhappy marriage where the two dare not divorce each other. Hu's visit won't change the fundamental nature of the relationship, but it has reminded both countries, and also conveyed to the world, that a healthy Sino-US relationship is in their best interests and any unilateral alteration of this mutually dependent economic relationship would amount to mutually assured destruction.³³

The critical reactions of US lawmakers to Hu's visit have to be taken with a pinch of salt. Though some of their concerns have substance, it is also a fact that they emanate from their own domestic political situation and are related to their country's own structural economic problems. Although Hu tried to instil trust and mutual cooperation by reiterating China's path of peaceful development, this moderate approach can never fully assure the US about China's real intentions and ambitions especially given its huge military build up. Another major problem in Sino-US relationship is their varying interpretation of each other's intentions. Despite all differences and problems in the Sino-US relationship, both countries will continue to interact with each other and make sure that friction in one area does not jeopardise the entire relationship.

The US-China joint statement referred to the Asia-Pacific region and other international issues like Sudan, Iran and North Korea, Tibet and Taiwan, but surprisingly did not refer to South Asia. The official US position is that the absence of a reference to Beijing's role in South Asia did not necessarily reflect a change in policy.³⁴ Talking about the importance of India in US foreign policy, the White House made it clear at the start of Hu's visit that the US-China relationship and India-US relationship are different and therefore, any direct comparison of the Hu-Obama and Obama-Manmohan summits is pointless.³⁵

³³ Anthony L. Hall, "Mr. Hu comes to Washington," *The Ipinion Journal*, January 19, 2011, at <http://www.theipinionsjournal.com/index.php/2011/01/mr-hu-comes-to-washington/> (accessed on January 21, 2011).

³⁴ "No South Asia reference in US-China joint statement," *Afghanistan News Net*, January 21, 2011, at <http://www.afghanistannews.net/story/734358> (accessed on January 23, 2011).

³⁵ "India, US enjoy very personal relationship: White House," *The Indian Express*, January 19, 2011, at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/india-us-enjoy-very-personal-relationship-white-house/739540/.Acceseed> (accessed on January 23, 2011).

However, some doubts have been cast on this by the Indian strategic community. One Indian commentator noted that even if the US approach to China and India, the Chinese attitude to the US and India, and the Indian policy towards the US and China are different, they are interlinked and interdependent.³⁶ Therefore, the coming closer of the US and China will have implications for India. In fact, the Obama administration will need to find common ground with China to meet many of its policy objectives. Given the evolving geopolitical situations in Asia and the protectionist tendencies that have been articulated by Obama on occasion, the US will increase its dealings with China more than with any other power in the region.

For India, the impact of Hu Jintao's state visit to USA may be indirect. It would not be surprising if during his visit to the US, India's national security advisor had raised issues that are common to the US, China, and India.³⁷ India must review the situation and realistically assess the status of Sino-US relations before the India-US strategic dialogue scheduled for April 2011, in which both Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates are scheduled to participate. Issues like climate change, terrorism, Afghanistan, Tibet and the resurgence of Taliban could bring India closer to the Sino-US dialogue agenda. This becomes important for India given its rising international posture vis-a-vis both the US and China on diverse issues at different levels. India should accept the reality that currently the US administration is in search of a "cooperative" China to deal with issues like domestic unemployment, climate change and the financial crisis. In his speech to Chinese youth at the Shanghai Science and Technology Museum on November 16, 2009, President Obama had said: "Today we have a positive, constructive and comprehensive relationship that opens the door to partnership on the key global issues ... economic recovery, development of clean energy, stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and the surge of climate change..."³⁸ It would be in India's interest to analyse the current status of Sino-US relations and start building a long-term cooperative partnership with both countries at different levels.

The existence of the United States-China-India triangle is a debatable subject. Those who consider this triangle a reality in world politics, argue that India's core interests would stand marginalised if the US and China achieve coherence in their relations by

³⁶ T.P. Sreenivasan, "Banquo's ghost at the White House," *Rediff,news*, January 25, 2011, at <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/column-tpsreenivasan-on-banquos-ghost-at-hu-jintaos-white-house-dinner/20110125.htm>. Accessed (accessed on January 26, 2011).

³⁷ India's National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon visited the US last week for periodic discussions with his counterpart Tom Donilon.

³⁸ "Obama: US has positive, constructive, comprehensive relationship with China", *Xinhua*, November 16, 2009, at http://www.china.org.cn/world/obamas_asia_tour/2009-11/16/content_18897273.htm (accessed on January 24, 2011).

concentrating on the economic side of the relationship.³⁹ In contrast, others argue that China and the US have major differences mainly over the issue of human rights, and therefore, it is too early to comment whether Hu's visit has stabilised the Sino-US relationship. Moreover, India too, retains the capacity to engage both China and the US on its own terms and there is no reason to conclude that India cannot execute this balancing act.⁴⁰

What however cannot be ignored is that a stable US-China relationship is in India's best interests. India will not be able to prevent itself from getting involved or at least be affected if major tensions were to break out between the US and China in future. If such a situation arises, India would face a fundamental strategic dilemma, which might result either in India's isolation or in having to choose one of these two strategic partners. All said and done, the question that still remains unanswered is to what extent Hu's visit to Washington stabilised the unstable Sino-US relationship. Thus, it is too early to comment whether a close Sino-US relationship will be detrimental to India's interests.

³⁹ Sumit Ganguly argued *US-China relations were entering a new phase characterized by acknowledged parity and a commitment to stabilizing this bilateral relationship*. See, "Hu Jintao, Obama and India," *South Asian Idea*, January 24, 2011, at <http://southasianidea.com/foreign-policy/hu-jintao-obama-and-india/> (accessed on January 26, 2011).

⁴⁰ T.P. Sreenivasan, "Banquo's ghost at the White House," *Rediffnews*, January 25, 2011, at <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/column-tpsreenivasan-on-banquos-ghost-at-hu-jintaos-white-house-dinner/20110125.htm>. Accessed (accessed on January 26, 2011).