



**THE OBAMA-XI  
SUMMIT:  
THREE ESSENTIAL  
MESSAGES FROM  
WASHINGTON**

Policy Brief  
November 2014

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THREE ESSENTIAL MESSAGES  
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## Abstract

In mid-November, U.S. President Barack Obama will meet with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Beijing in what has been billed as a sequel to their June 2013 gathering in southern California. The leaders will have the opportunity to take stock of where the relationship is today and chart the course forward. Given this extraordinary opportunity for an open exchange of each other's interests and intentions, President Obama should raise the following three items for discussion in Beijing:

- (i) Express the desire to move away from big conceptual frameworks toward practical cooperation and the management of differences;
  - (ii) Engage President Xi in a conversation about how China perceives the "status quo" in Asia; and
  - (iii) Clarify that China's assertiveness in East Asia is challenging vital national interests of the United States.
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## Introduction

In mid-November, U.S. President Barack Obama will meet with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Beijing in what has been billed as a sequel to their June 2013 gathering in southern California. The leaders will have the opportunity to take stock of where the relationship is today and chart a course forward for enhancing cooperation and managing competition in the years ahead.

The meeting comes at a time of heightened friction in the bilateral relationship, aggravated by enduring perceptions on both sides that the other is conspiring against it. From a U.S. perspective, Chinese assertiveness in East Asia is undermining regional stability and Beijing is playing unhelpful (or at best negligible) roles on several international issues, including nonproliferation efforts in North Korea and Iran, civil war in Syria, and Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory. From Beijing's viewpoint, Washington is rebalancing to Asia to constrain China's rise, while bolstering an international system that unfairly disadvantages the developing world.

At the same time, however, the two governments remain committed to avoiding a Cold War-like

competition that would inevitably harm the interests of both countries. In this context, a robust engagement between the presidents could not come at a better time given the ongoing need to put Asia's future on a more stable footing.

At the November meeting, the leaders will engage on strategic-level issues at the heart of the U.S.-China relationship. Given this extraordinary opportunity for an open exchange of each other's interests and intentions, President Obama should raise the following three items for discussion in Beijing:

- I. Express the desire to move away from big conceptual frameworks toward practical cooperation and the management of differences;
- II. Engage President Xi in a conversation about how China perceives the "status quo" in Asia; and
- III. Clarify that China's assertiveness in East Asia is challenging vital national interests of the United States.

## I. Express the desire to move away from big conceptual frameworks toward practical cooperation and the management of differences

Policymakers on both sides of the Pacific Ocean have long sought a framework for U.S.-China relations that can guide bilateral ties to more stable and fruitful ground.<sup>1</sup> Building on this tradition during a visit to Washington in February 2012, then-Vice President Xi Jinping floated the idea that the United States and China should build a “new type of relationship between major powers.”<sup>2</sup> Leading Chinese officials involved in the bilateral relationship further reinforced the concept, including President Hu Jintao, State Counselor Dai Bingguo, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and Vice Foreign Minister for North America and Oceania Cui Tiankai.

This framework came as no surprise to those following the debate in China over how best to ensure its continued economic and political rise – a leading topic for Chinese academics, think tanks, and government study groups throughout the 2000s.<sup>3</sup> The dominant conclusion of this intellectual exercise was that China would have to avoid overt competition and conflict with the United States, seen by many as the principal obstacle to China’s rightful re-ascendance in Asia.

The “new type” or “new model” was therefore meant to eschew the alleged “old model” of great power rivalry. Given the aspiration in Washington to have a more stable and positive relationship with China, U.S. officials were inclined to support Xi’s conceptual offering. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sounded similar themes in a March 2012 speech in which she argued that the two countries needed “a new answer to the ancient question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet.”<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, from the perspective of the Obama administration, the start of Xi Jinping’s tenure as president in 2013 provided an opportunity to set the bilateral relationship on a more productive course if both sides could commit to expanding cooperation and managing areas of competition. In this sense, buying into the “new model” was worth the chance that it might fall flat. At the Sunnylands retreat in June 2013, Obama welcomed the effort to “forge a new model of cooperation between countries based on mutual interest and mutual respect.”<sup>5</sup> In November 2013, National Security Advisor Susan Rice spoke at Georgetown University of the need to “operationalize a new model of major power relations.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the U.S. side, American presidents have tested concepts of China as both a “strategic partner” and a strategic competitor,” while Obama administration officials offered the notion of “strategic reassurance” in 2009. For example, see U.S. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, “China’s Arrival: The Long March to Global Power,” Washington, D.C., September 24, 2009. <http://www.cnas.org/files/multimedia/documents/Deputy%20Secretary%20James%20Steinberg%27s%20September%2024,%202009%20Keynote%20Address%20Transcript.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> David Lampton, “A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.-China Ties,” *Asia Policy*, July 2013, <http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=650>.

<sup>3</sup> See Ely Ratner, “Rebalancing to Asia with an Insecure China,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2013, pp. 27-8, [http://csis.org/files/publication/TWQ\\_13Spring\\_Ratner.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/TWQ_13Spring_Ratner.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, Department of State, “Remarks at the U.S. Institute of Peace China Conference.” Speech at USIP in Washington, D.C., March 7, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/03/185402.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> President Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama and President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China Before Bilateral Meeting,” Palm Springs, California, June 7, 2013. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/07/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-jinping-peoples-republic-china>

<sup>6</sup> Susan Rice, “America’s Future in Asia,” Washington, D.C., November 20, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/11/21/remarks-prepared-delivery-national-security-advisor-susan-e-rice>.

Nevertheless, even though the goals of expanding cooperation and minimizing conflict are largely unobjectionable, the “new model” concept has at times had a corrosive effect on U.S. interests in Asia. Announcements about U.S.-China efforts to build a “new model” provoked fears throughout the region of a G-2 condominium in which major issues would be managed by Washington and Beijing without sufficient care or consultation with other countries. This was particularly acute for U.S. allies and partners in Asia that, to varying degrees, rely on the United States for their security and were increasingly feeling the pressures of Chinese assertiveness.

A number of Asian diplomats in Washington have since reported that Chinese officials are further stoking these concerns by imploring governments throughout the region that the United States is an unreliable partner and that the real meaning of the “new model” consensus between Obama and Xi is that the United States will privilege U.S.-China ties over other issues and relationships.

Meanwhile, Chinese officials have articulated the “new model” as a call for unilateral U.S.

accommodation to China’s interests. Discussing the concept in July 2012, now-PRC Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai wrote that, “China has never done anything to undermine U.S. core interests and major concerns, yet what the United States has done in matters concerning China’s core and important interests and major concerns is unsatisfactory.”<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, building a new type of great power relationship would require the United States to forgo interests in Asia without reciprocal compromise from Beijing.

As a result, public articulations from both sides about the “new model” have garnered intense scrutiny and generated suspicion in the United States and the region.<sup>8</sup> Rather than spending precious time redefining and rearticulating the “new model” concept, Obama should express that the United States will seek to avoid getting bogged down in debates and negotiations over big conceptual frameworks. Instead, Washington will primarily focus on expanding areas of practical cooperation and managing differences. In doing so, the November summit provides an excellent opportunity for the United States to politely distance itself from the “new model” rhetoric.

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<sup>7</sup> Cui Tiankai and Pang Hanzhao, “China-/US Relations in China’s Overall Diplomacy in the New Era.” *China International Strategy Review*, July 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Erickson and Adam Liff, “Not-So-Empty Talk: The Danger of China’s ‘New Type of Great-Power Relations’ Slogan,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 9, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142178/andrew-s-erickson-and-adam-liff/not-so-empty-talk>.

## II. Engage President Xi in a conversation about how China perceives the “status quo” in Asia

At the 2014 ASEAN Regional Forum, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry proposed a voluntary “freeze” on provocative actions in the South China Sea, such as island seizures and land reclamation. Although U.S. officials called the proposal “common sense,” it was quickly rejected by China as premature and unnecessary.<sup>9</sup>

This contentious exchange highlighted much more than a simple disagreement over what kinds of activities should be permitted in the South China Sea. Instead, it raised the fundamental question of whether Beijing accepts the existing order in Asia.

Rejection of the prevailing administration status quo in Asia would comport with what appears to have been a significant evolution in China’s behavior in maritime Asia over the last year toward a more proactive effort to revise the territorial boundaries in the region. Although China has been acting assertively for several years, its coercive actions were primarily in response to what Beijing perceived as the provocations of others, such as the Philippines employment of a military vessel at Scarborough Reef in April 2012 and Japan’s decision to “nationalize” the *Senkaku/Diaoyu* Islands in November 2012.<sup>10</sup>

More recently, however, Chinese assertiveness – including the pronouncement of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that covered areas administered by Japan, the announcement of new fishing regulations in disputed waters, and the placement of an oil rig in waters claimed by Vietnam – has occurred without provocation.<sup>11</sup>

During this time, Chinese officials and scholars have changed their tune: Instead of referring

to specific actions that are compelling China to assert its claims more forcefully, they are pointing more generally to the collective events of the last 30 years, arguing that China has lost ground by sitting on the sidelines and pursuing a purely diplomatic course. Now, they say, China is a powerful country and is going to make up for lost time.

While this may make good sense to Chinese diplomats and strategists, it is also an explicit rejection of the existing administrative and territorial status quo in Asia.

President Obama should seize the opportunity to get top-level clarification on this issue. Before discussing specific actions in the South and East China Seas, he should ask President Xi whether China accepts the prevailing administrative status quo in Asia, and if not, under what conditions China would be sufficiently satisfied to cease its territorial revisionism.

Far more than just an academic fascination, definitions of the status quo are critical to effective policymaking. Clarification from Xi Jinping on China’s territorial perspectives and ambitions would inform U.S. policy, U.S.-China engagement and U.S. coordination with regional partners in Asia. For example, proposals like the “freeze” or a binding Code of Conduct for the South China Sea may have ancillary diplomatic value, but harbor little hope of promoting long-term stability if China believes the existing order in Asia is unfair and, more importantly, intolerable.

More generally, without a clear sense of how each other perceives and values the status quo in Asia, the United States and China will continue to talk past one another on policy initiatives vital to long-term stability, such as confidence-building measures and crisis management mechanisms.

<sup>9</sup> David Brunnstrom, “U.S. to press South China Sea freeze despite China rejection,” Reuters, August 4, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/04/us-usa-southchinasea-asean-idUSKBN0G421J20140804>.

<sup>10</sup> International Crisis Group, “Dangerous Waters: China-Japan Relations on the Rocks,” April 8, 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/china/245-dangerous-waters-china-japan-relations-on-the-rocks.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> Ely Ratner, “China Undeterred and Unapologetic,” *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2014, [http://warontherocks.com/2014/06/china-undeterred-and-unapologetic/#\\_](http://warontherocks.com/2014/06/china-undeterred-and-unapologetic/#_).

### III. Clarify that China's assertiveness in East Asia is challenging vital national interests of the United States.

Moving from long-term visions of the bilateral relationship to issues of immediate concern, President Obama should make clear that continued Chinese assertiveness in Asia is directly challenging key interests of the United States.

Following repeated acts of Chinese coercion in Asia, the United States responded more forcefully to China's ADIZ announcement in November 2013. Assistant Secretary of State Danny Russel's congressional testimony in February 2014 signaled heightened alarm in Washington in which he called the ADIZ announcement, "a provocative act and a serious step in the wrong direction."<sup>12</sup>

But even as the United States has taken a stronger rhetorical stance, U.S. officials have stuck to the talking points of the last five years that articulate U.S. interests in the East and South China Seas as the maintenance of peace and stability, respect for international law, unimpeded lawful commerce and freedom of navigation and overflight. This has been combined with expressions of concern about the interests of U.S. allies.

Remarks by U.S. officials have also underscored that the United States is partly in Asia to help build a regional order undergirded by international norms. As Assistant Secretary Russel told Congress in February:

*The common thread running through our strategic rebalancing is a determination to ensure that the Asia-Pacific remains an open, inclusive, and prosperous region guided by widely accepted rules and standards and a respect for international law.<sup>13</sup>*

These are important goals of the United States and deserve careful and repeated emphasis. But they also obscure the fact that the United States has its own national interests in Asia related to the security and prosperity of the American people. Rather than focusing only on interests related to international rules and norms, President Obama should also convey to President Xi that China's territorial revisionism threatens U.S. interests directly and will become an increasingly central feature of U.S.-China relations if Beijing continues taking coercive measures to administer and control large swaths of the South and East China Seas.

President Obama should be direct with Xi about what is at stake for the United States in Asia. This will also reduce the element of surprise in Beijing when the United States takes additional actions to stem Chinese assertiveness.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Russel, "Maritime Disputes in East Asia," Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, Washington, D.C., February 5, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2014/02/221293.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Russel, "Maritime Disputes in East Asia," Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, Washington, D.C., February 5, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2014/02/221293.htm>.

## Conclusion

The summit in November will provide ample time for President Obama and Xi to engage on a range of bilateral, regional and international issues. In the spirit of enhancing the long-term stability of the relationship, Obama should consider raising three strategic-level items: the need to focus on concrete initiatives over big conceptual frameworks, to engage Xi on China's position on the administrative status quo in Asia and to communicate that Chinese assertiveness is a matter of direct U.S. national interest.

Engaging on these issues will provide a deeper understanding of Xi's intentions in East Asia and contribute to a vital conversation between the leaders about whether there

is a future security environment in Asia that would be mutually acceptable to both parties. From Washington's perspective, even as the competitive elements of relations with China are large and growing, there is little question that China will remain an integral part of the regional economic and political order. With this as a backdrop, Obama should seek to discern Xi's aspirations for Asia's future, including its territorial boundaries and the concurrent security architecture of institutions, alliances and rules. This will give the United States a better understanding of opportunities for working toward a middle ground, rather than remaining gridlocked on current areas of tactical disagreement.



## About the Author

Dr Ely Ratner is Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). Prior to joining CNAS he served on the China Desk at the State Department as the lead political officer covering China's external relations in Asia. He has also worked as an Associate Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation and as a Professional Staff Member on the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Dr Ratner has testified as an expert witness on Asian security affairs before the U.S. Congress and the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. His commentary and research have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Quarterly*, *The National Interest*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *International Studies Quarterly* and *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, among others. He received his PhD in Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley and his BA from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, where he graduated Magna Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa.

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