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# Conduct Befitting a Great Power

Responsibility and Sovereignty in U.S.-China Relations

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Nina Hachigian January 2011

# Introduction and summary

Chinese President Hu Jintao arrives in Washington for a state visit later this month, with hopes high in both capitals that his trip may serve to smooth out the edges of a U.S.-China relationship that has frayed over the past year. Clashes over security, the global economy, and differing political values challenge the relationship today. At the heart of many of these disputes are conflicting understandings about how a great power should act in the 21st century.

Washington and Beijing have different conceptions of global responsibility. Washington has spent decades since World War II investing in an international architecture of economic and security accords that delivered stability and enabled China's growth. Now Washington wants Beijing to play by the rules, help improve the international system, and contribute to solving urgent global problems—many of which China helps to create, among them economic imbalances and global warming.

The United States believes China's incredible growth rate, astronomic foreign currency reserves, and track record of making successful investments in its national priorities means it is more able than most nations to contribute to the needs of the global community. In contrast, China suspects America's desire to see it play a larger global role is part of a strategy designed to stifle its growth and challenge its autonomy. Beijing wants to remain highly focused on its domestic problems and argues that it is being internationally responsible in many ways, whether or not it is fulfilling America's wishes.

Reconciling the Chinese and American ideas about global responsibility involves questions of sovereignty as well. This is because China is now a “systemically important” player in many areas.<sup>1</sup> In the international economy, global climate concerns, Asian regional security, cyber security, space, pandemic prevention, and other arenas, China today is more than a regular “stakeholder.” China has become, like the United States, a country on whose actions the health of the whole system depends.

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This poses challenges to China's ideas of national sovereignty. China's leaders hold to a fairly absolutist, 19th century view that national governments have the right to do whatever they please inside their own borders without outside interference. Yet many of China's decisions on domestic policy, such as the value of its currency, have global implications.

A shared understanding of even the basic components of global responsibility could offer a starting point for eventual convergence of U.S. and Chinese viewpoints. Understanding that countries act only to fulfill their national interests, a test of global responsibility should have the following three parts:

- Will the action in question benefit the global community as well as the country?
- Does the action strengthen the international system or weaken it?
- Is the action enough, given the magnitude of the problem and the capacity of others to act?

By this test, China has been responsible on some issues, including voting for and enforcing U.N. sanctions against North Korea in 2009 and then exerting pressure on Pyongyang to end its provocative attacks on South Korea in 2010, and in enacting a huge domestic economic stimulus package amid the Great Recession. But on many other issues, including efforts to address global economic imbalances, maritime disputes, and human rights, China has not met this standard. Yet for the international system to operate well, China cannot pick and choose when to honor 21st century ideas of sovereignty and when to remain tied to a 19th century conception.

China's willingness to act responsibly also bolsters the political consensus in the United States that supports the U.S. role as the responsible superpower. This consensus is weakening. Policymakers increasingly voice concerns about spending for global obligations in light of domestic priorities and the soaring national debt. And among conservatives in our country, there is a growing and dangerous dedication to an absolutist ideal of national sovereignty—one that China's leaders share—according to which America does not have to abide by the rules of the international order.

It is possible that American and Chinese conceptions of global responsibility and sovereignty will converge over time to meet the needs of the 21st century as China adjusts to its global role, assuming that the consensus in the United States holds for America continuing to play the role of the responsible leader. If so, we can expect progress on rebalancing the global economy as well as tackling global

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warming, poverty, pandemics, and nuclear proliferation, among other global issues. But that convergence is hardly a sure thing, especially given the politically charged window of the next two years leading up to a power transition in China and a U.S. presidential election in 2012.

In order to meet the goals of maximizing the upside of the bilateral relationship for the United States, increasing Chinese responsibility, and maintaining U.S. leverage and leadership, this report argues that the Obama administration should take steps that include:

- Facilitating job-creating Chinese direct investment in the United States
- Maintaining U.S. leverage in Asia by continuing to deepen our ties with partners and allies in the region
- Acting like a 21st century superpower by engaging with and strengthening the international architecture of rules, norms, and institutions
- Not losing the current consensus in the U.S. Congress, media, and public that favors a pragmatic U.S.-China policy

In the pages that follow, this report will offer a brief history of U.S.-China relations under the Obama administration and then explore differing U.S. and Chinese conceptions of global responsibility and national sovereignty, including some of the political debate surrounding the future of the American leadership role in the world. It will conclude with detailed policy recommendations for the Obama administration as outlined briefly above. Hopefully these recommendations will help foster the understanding and dedication needed to build a 21st century relationship of global responsibility between the United States and China.

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