

A UNIQUE MEETING OF POWERS

Jayantha Dhanapala is encouraged by the recent meeting between two world leaders

A summit meeting between the leaders of the world's sole superpower and potential superpower took place on 7 and 8 June with scarcely a ripple in the international media. Perhaps it was because the meeting – on Sunnylands Estate, outside Palm Springs, in California – was an all-too-brief, informal and shirt-sleeved two-day affair shorn of all the trappings of a state visit.

Or perhaps it was essentially a 'getting to know you' meeting just three months after Xi Jinping assumed the presidency of China, where the 51-year-old and recently re-elected Barack Obama was sizing up the 59-year-old Xi.

In any event, the fact that China agreed to such a format after declining persistent US proposals in the past reveals the comfort level of the new Chinese leadership in such an encounter – and China's arrival on the world stage, as if that requires any demonstration. No formal statements or joint communiqués were issued, and observers were left to read the tea leaves after the meeting.

CRITICAL RELATIONSHIP

There is no doubt that for the next decade (at least), the most important bilateral relationship in global affairs will be between the US and China. The challenge for both – the US, as the sole superpower; and China, as a potential superpower – is to integrate China into the global system



NEW LOOK US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping, along with their delegates, at a meeting at the Annenberg Retreat in California, on 8 June. Skipping the usual summit pageantry, Obama and Xi went without ties, in a departure from the stifling formality that marked Obama's halting interactions with China's former president Hu Jintao.

smoothly, while ensuring that the national interests of both countries do not collide, but can be harmonised in the interests of global peace and stability.

Indeed, that was the expressed wish of Xi Jinping, who spoke of a new model of bilateral relationship by stressing cooperation over conflict. However, history proves that the national interests of countries do not always converge conveniently. History, geography, economic interests and a variety of other

factors can dictate the direction of national interest.

Indeed, the US and China are both huge countries that span over nine million square kilometres each, but with population sizes that are very different – the US with about 315 million and China with 1.35 billion. The IMF's 2013 World Economic Outlook states that the US economy is the world's largest economy, contributing 18.9 percent to world GDP. China's economy is the second-largest, contributing 14.9 percent – it is

ahead of Japan, Germany and India.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The 2013 UNDP Human Development Report provides an interesting comparison of human development indicators. Beginning with the obvious hiatus in Gross National Income per capita in the US (US\$ 43,480) in 2005 in PPP, to China's 7,945 US Dollars. Life expectancy is 78.7 years in the US, to 73.7 in China. And gender inequality is 0.256 in the US and 0.2213 in China.

These and other social

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This world view was inherited from ancient times and is reinforced by the fact that historically, China's cultural, scientific and technological innovations and achievements were largely developed in isolation – i.e. within China's boundaries.

Thus, the development of a strong and cohesive sense of Chinese nationalism that bristled under the so-called 'century of shame' – lasting roughly from the mid 19th century to the mid 20th century and characterised by foreign invasion, occupation, war and national humiliation – is understandable.

Mao Zedong said on 1 October 1949 at Tiananmen Square that "China has stood up," signifying that Napoleon's 'sleeping giant' had woken up and would begin – under its own sovereign leadership and by its own efforts – to modernise and attain its rightful place in the international community.

That China has done so in less than five decades is undisputed. And in doing so, China has gone through disastrous internal conflict during the Cultural Revolution and pursued mistaken economic policies like the Great Leap Forward. These self-inflicted obstacles have only made China's leaders more determined to make up for lost time by adopting pragmatic economic and foreign policies.

After the summit, the press coverage from the American side indicated that areas of tension such as the Pacific, the nuclear ambitions of North Korea, cyber espionage, climate change and trade issues (especially intellectual property rights) were among the subjects discussed. Reportedly, human rights issues – and in particular, the release of 16 Chinese political prisoners – were also discussed.

THE SNOWDEN FACTOR Ironically, the young whistle-

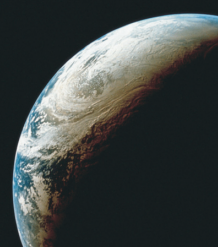
blower Edward Snowden who landed in Hong Kong claiming that the United States' PRISM programme was targeting foreign countries like China in addition to US citizens threatened to wreck whatever goodwill was created by the Obama-Xi summit.

Snowden's departure from Hong Kong after the Hong Kong Government ruled that the extradition request from the US was incomplete, was accompanied by a strong diatribe from China's Xinhua News Agency, accusing the US of cyber espionage. A crisis has been averted; but only temporarily, since cyber espionage is a topic in which both countries are not guiltless. **BUILDING BRIDGES** Another immediate outcome of the summit was developments regarding North Korea, where China was more explicit over its impatience with the Pyongyang leadership. The US and China have a common desire not to see a nuclear-weapon-armed North Korea.

A high-level visit from North Korea to Beijing followed the Obama-Xi summit intended to mend fences with China. The US has probably gained a better understanding of China's relations with North Korea and should now respond positively to Pyongyang's offer of talks. Talks between North and South Korea are also scheduled.

An opening has thus been created for a dialogue between the US and China which can lead to concrete agreements. That is no mean achievement in a complex relationship with its historical baggage and its current competitive interests. What must be avoided at all costs is a Cold War between China and the US, and a misguided attempt to 'contain' China.

CURRENT AFFAIRS



indicators illustrate a narrower gap between the two countries in human development terms than the GDP indicator would imply. The actual Human Development Index for the US is 0.937, ranking it third in the world. For China it is 0.699, placing it at No. 101 (for purposes of comparison, India ranks 136th with 0.554 and Sri Lanka is at No. 92 with 0.715).

The point of this comparison is to illustrate the enormous success recorded by China in the recent past, in reducing poverty and reaching a point of economic take-off necessary to sustain such a huge population. While the relative political

importance and economic strength of these two nuclear weapon states and permanent members of the UN Security Council is undoubtedly an important factor, their bilateral relationship inter se, and their importance to each other will largely determine the course of their future relationship and global politics.

DISTINCT IMAGES Both countries have distinct images of themselves. Sinologists have sometimes belaboured the point that the Chinese name for China (Zhōngguó) literally means 'middle' or 'central kingdom,' signifying a hub around which all else revolves.