

Lexington | Buttering-up and scolding

Xi Jinping, the probable next president of China, endures his rite of passage in America



WHEN he wants to relax, the man most likely to be the next leader of China enjoys watching American basketball on television. He has fond memories of his brief stay with an American family in Iowa more than a quarter of a century ago. There he saw local corn-farming and was deeply impressed by America's hospitality and industriousness.

So at least Xi Jinping, China's vice-president, told the Washington Post in written remarks on the eve of his state visit this week. For his part, Barack Obama was keen to build on the bonhomie. Mr Xi represents a new generation of Chinese leaders, one that might be expected to have a better understanding of the West and its ways than its elderly forebears. At 58, China's leader-in-waiting is only eight years older than America's youthful president. He has a daughter studying at Harvard. If Mr Obama is re-elected in November, this is a personal relationship that could help shape the history of the world.

It was therefore a bit of a boon that Mr Xi is not yet China's leader, a job he is expected to inherit in stages starting towards the end of this year. Though loaded with symbolic significance (it coincided with the 40th anniversary of Nixon's visit to China), this visit was formally only the sequel to a visit that Joe Biden, America's vice-president, made as Mr Xi's guest last year. That freed the White House to concentrate on what officials acknowledged was an "investment in relationship-building" rather than a working visit focused on what diplomats know horribly as "deliverables". A lot of the trip consisted of mutual buttering-up.

As luck had it, Mr Xi met Mr Obama in the Oval Office on Valentine's Day. He was lunched and dined by Mr Biden and Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state, and called on the Pentagon, the Chamber of Commerce and Capitol Hill, before flying off to Iowa and Los Angeles, where he was planning to take in a Lakers game.

Nonetheless, no Chinese leader who visits America during an election year can expect just to be buttered up. China-bashing shifts into higher gear when elections draw near. Mitt Romney, still by a whisker the Republicans' probable nominee, calls China a "cheater" he would designate as a currency manipulator on his first day in office. And because the Republicans routinely accuse Mr Obama of being too soft on the rising superpower, the administration had to toss some scolding into the mix as well.

So Mr Xi was duly presented with a familiar menu of complaints. Though Mr Obama and his officials welcomed China's peaceful rise, they delivered stern public reminders of the new responsibilities this entailed. They want China to let its currency appreciate faster, observe the "rules of the road" on trade and intellectual property and fall in line with Western pressure on Syria and Iran. The Americans are still bitter about China's decision to join Russia in vetoing UN Security Council action on Syria earlier this month. A "travesty", was Mrs Clinton's word at the time.

On top of this, Mr Xi was made to endure the timeworn American sermon on how observing human rights at home would be in China's own long-term interest. In return, he gave China's timeworn answer. His country had already made "tremendous" strides in human rights during 30 years of reform, but, yes, there was more to do and China was open to "candid" discussions provided they were based on "equality and mutual respect".

Unlike Mr Obama, Mr Xi does not have a general election to win. But he is not yet top man, and his comportment in America was under close scrutiny back home. The first big visit to America of a future leader of China is both a test and a rite of passage. Party factions and military leaders need to be sure that their chosen man has what it takes to do business with the prevailing superpower without any hint of kowtowing.

Once Mr Xi has passed his test, what then? However warm any personal chemistry with Mr Obama, relations between the two countries are fated to remain wary. The basketball-loving Mr Xi may know more about America than President Hu Jintao does, but those who hope for bold internal political reform after the changing of the guard in Beijing should brace for disappointment. Right now, the trend is in the opposite direction.

New leaders, same old China

In recent months China has jailed prominent dissidents and cracked down hard on protesters in Tibet and Xinjiang. Armies of censors still seal China off from large parts of the internet, and the country's internal politics remain opaque. The West still understands precious little about how Mr Hu gets on with his prime minister, Wen Jiabao, let alone about the mysterious recent feuding between the new cast of princelings about to take the stage (see page 45). To begin with at least, Mr Xi is expected to act as first among equals inside a cautious Politburo that is no less paranoid about America than America is about China.

The mutual paranoia is, of course, entirely justified. Behind this week's exercise in buttering-up and scolding is a broader tension in the two countries' approaches to one another. The new friends know that they are also rivals. Mr Obama keeps telling China how much he welcomes its rise, but at the same time his "strategic pivot" to Asia has shored up America's encircling alliances with the countries on China's periphery, just in case its rise turns out to be less peaceful than advertised.

Needless to say, this hedging strategy does not go down well in Beijing. "The vast Pacific Ocean has ample space for China and the United States," Mr Xi told the Washington Post. But at a time when people were longing for peace, he added, the emphasis on military reinforcement and alliances "is not really what most countries in the region hope to see". America and China have plenty more to learn about one another. In some ways, however, they already understand each other all too well. •