

## Here we go again

President Xi Jinping shows interest in reviving ties with America. How far is he prepared to go?



AFTER his historic meeting with Mao Zedong in 1972, Richard Nixon wrote in his diary of what he called “probably the most moving moment” of the hour-long encounter: the chairman clasp[ing] the American leader’s hand for about a minute as they sat talking. Such sparks of personal chemistry are what China’s new president, Xi Jinping, and Barack Obama may be hoping to recreate during an informal summit on June 7th and 8th.

As *The Economist* went to press Mr Xi was winding up a week-long visit to Latin America and the Caribbean (see article) before heading on to meet Mr Obama at Sunnylands, an estate in the desert town of Rancho Mirage, California, that once belonged to Walter Annenberg, a publisher. Never before has such a prolonged informal encounter between the two countries’ leaders been scheduled (dress code: “no neckties”). Its rarity and its timing so early in Mr Xi’s presidency suggest a recognition by both countries that their relationship badly needs new zest.

Relations have become increasingly strained by American allegations of Chinese government involvement in the widespread hacking of American computer systems (see article) and signs of greater assertiveness by China in its maritime disputes with American allies in the western Pacific. China is worried by America’s security “pivot” towards Asia.

American officials are encouraged, however, by Mr Xi’s willingness to engage in such freewheeling diplomacy. His predecessor, Hu Jintao, shunned it, preferring to stick to formal agendas. Before Mr Hu, Jiang Zemin pressed for, and eventually secured, an informal summit with George W. Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. But that meeting in 2002 was much briefer, and Mr Jiang was just days away from stepping down. For the newly installed Mr Xi, the decision to engage in unscripted discussions spread over two days shows unusual confidence in his political grip and his mastery of a vital and highly complex area of foreign policy.

Mr Xi has been quick to take up the political reins—he became commander-in-chief of the army at the same time as assuming leadership of the Communist Party last November, instead of having to wait another two years as Mr Hu did. Unlike Mr Hu, a dour apparatchik,

he has the poise and confidence of one born to power: his father was one of Mao's comrades-in-arms. He "fills the room with his presence", says a Western diplomat.

But it has not been easy for Western officials to make out how Mr Xi plans to wield his power; hence the importance (as the Americans see it) of the summit in California. There have been mixed signals. Mr Xi has called for a "new type of great-power relationship", implying that China's rise will pose no threat to America—unlike the rise of other powers in history and the conflicts they caused. But in the months leading up to his assumption of power Mr Xi was already in charge of a new push in the East and South China Seas to assert longstanding Chinese claims to islands controlled by Japan and the Philippines, both American allies. These efforts, involving patrols by civilian law-enforcement vessels, persist despite widespread alarm in the region. On June 1st America's defence secretary, Chuck Hagel, told a regional security conference in Singapore that America was "firmly against any coercive attempts to alter the status quo" in the two seas. China does not appear to be listening.



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Mr Obama will be encouraged by Mr Xi's seeming willingness to tackle tough economic reforms that Mr Hu, as president, lacked either the courage or the conviction to deal with. Chinese officials have also been talking more enthusiastically about the Trans-Pacific Partnership. This proposed free-trade arrangement among Asia-Pacific countries is supported by America. In the past Chinese officials often described it as an effort to marginalise China economically by setting high barriers to entry. Now some see it as a useful tool for promoting economic reforms. China is also sounding more eager to work with America on climate change and on bringing North Korea into line.

### **Some things stay the same**

At the same time Mr Xi has shown no sign of willingness to reform China politically. Controls on the internet and other media remain just as tight, heavy security measures remain in force in Tibetan areas and academics complain of stepped-up efforts to ensure ideological conformity on campuses. During a visit to Australia in 2011 Mr Obama said, in apparent reference to China, that prosperity without freedom was "just another form of poverty". There are few signs that Mr Xi has taken that message on board. Yet some analysts see grounds for optimism that Mr Xi could yet bring new warmth to the relationship.

One glimmer of hope concerns ties between the two countries' armed forces. These have long been troubled: subject to fits of Chinese rage over American arms sales to Taiwan and other perceived transgressions. But Bonnie Glaser of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a think-tank in Washington, says that in the weeks before November's handover of power in China a "change of tone" became evident among Chinese military officials in their talks with American counterparts: less confrontational and more committed to keeping military-to-military relations on an even keel. In October China appointed a new deputy chief of staff, Lieut-General Qi Jianguo, to handle such discussions. Ms Glaser says Pentagon officials have found him "a breath of fresh air".

There were hints of this at the conference in Singapore, which was organised by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London think-tank. Asked about China's dispute with Japan over islands in the East China Sea known as the Diaoyus in China and the Senkakus in Japan, General Qi repeated the views of Deng Xiaoping, who said in the 1970s that the problem could be shelved and possibly resolved by the next generation. A member of his delegation also confirmed that China had been sending ships on reconnaissance visits to waters within 200 nautical miles of American territory. He did not say where, but the Pentagon said in May that Chinese vessels had been making such approaches to Guam and Hawaii. China had long regarded similar American behaviour off China's coast as unlawful. It may now have changed its mind.

Pessimists might point to remarks made by General Qi in January in an article in a party newspaper, Study Times. In it he said that over the long term the shared interests of America and China would outweigh their differences. But he called for vigilance against what he called a strategy of "infiltration and subversion" by the West and for efforts to prevent "interference by outside powers" in the South China Sea. In other words, America has no right to get involved in disputes affecting a sea traversed by half the world's annual tonnage of maritime trade. Mr Obama begs to differ.

Optimists would call such statements ritual nods to party orthodoxy. If Chinese leaders are to embrace America, they need to protect themselves at home by presenting themselves as nationalists and party believers. Xie Tao of Beijing's Foreign Studies University suggests a comparison with Nixon, whose diplomatic breakthrough with China in 1972 was helped by Americans' belief in his anti-Communist credentials. In the two powers' relationship, however, both optimists and pessimists have been proven wrong before, and muddling through has often been the norm.

**Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 407, n. 8839, p. 48-49, June 8th – 14th 2013.**