



Help China to Help China

by Luzi Zhou and Fan Li

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After a rough 2010, US-China relations are on the upswing. US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates relaunched military to military relations after visiting Beijing in January, Chinese President Hu Jintao had a successful visit to the United States a week later, and after a long delay, the US Treasury ultimately declined to label China as a currency manipulator in its annual report. While there are reports announcing that US-China relations are entering a “new golden era,” it is likely to prove only temporary unless more fundamental concerns are addressed.

One key to the long-term success of the relationship is an objective US understanding of what China wants in the partnership. The answer is that word: “PARTNERSHIP.” While many in the US argue that they do see China as a partner, most Chinese do not feel that way. China wants to be treated as an equal, and that requires a fundamental shift in the US approach to China.

The US has very specific goals for China. In meetings, US representatives give their counterparts a “To Do List” that lays out in specific terms what China must do to become a responsible state. Not surprisingly, Chinese resent these demands and want more equal relations. Even when the US reaches out, it does so (consciously or unconsciously) as a “mentor” counseling a “student.” While the “US Helps China” approach is designed to expand common ground between the two countries, it isn’t working fast enough and may cause even larger gaps as China continues its rapid growth. President Hu called on the US to respect “different value systems, beliefs and development models” during his stay, an indication of the sensitivity surrounding this issue and a reminder that China will do things its own way, not by US standards.

There are several reasons why Chinese are uncomfortable with the idea that the “US Helps China.” First, despite the fact that exchanges and integration between the two nations at all levels have never been more active, there is still basic Chinese distrust of the US. Even if US intentions are good, most Chinese focus on US-China disputes over issues ranging from security to sovereignty. In their eyes, the US is suppressing China’s growth, fearing its rise will threaten US leadership. The US claims to respect China’s national interests but only when those interests do not jeopardize its own. Second, China sees US hypocrisy and a readiness to embrace double standards, particularly in economy and human rights. The “Do

as I say, but not as I do” approach is unlikely to win a lot of support in China. Third, Chinese do not believe US solutions fit China’s realities. The two countries have different development levels, political regimes and ways of decision making. Despite being the world’s second largest economy, China is still struggling to deal with poverty and domestic inequality. Having been the “Middle Kingdom” in history, China is well aware of the price of being a regional power. Fourth, though Chinese culture is inclusive, Chinese social architecture discriminates against outsiders as most nations do. Thus Chinese are suspicious of outsiders and their ability to help or influence their society. Finally, China’s national pride reduces tolerance for the idea that “XXX helps China.” Chinese want to be treated equally. The Chinese way of interpreting the world is strongly influenced by the country’s history of being invaded and semi-colonized for over a century. Its official slogan – seek the nation’s renaissance – is another way of saying that it will not be manipulated by other states.

In this light, the best approach for dealing with China is to “Help China to Help China.” This approach suggests that the US should focus on helping China to develop problem-solving capacities instead of asking (or telling) China to do what the US wants. To “Help China to Help China” the US has to change its mind set and embrace a genuine partnership with China.

For a start, the US needs to accept that China is a different country. The two countries have to build trust, and the US needs to understand the complexity of Chinese society and respect China’s development agenda and its priorities. The “100K Strong Initiative,” a program launched last year to get 100,000 US students to study in China, is a good start. However, the US can do more besides culture and language exchanges. To “Help China to Help China,” the US should focus assistance on constructive analysis, multi-stakeholder collaboration, localization of US practices, and sustainable operations. The US should engage Chinese across social boundaries, from the government to grassroots, from public institutions to private investors. Equally important, the US should recognize that it too can learn from China. This should be a two-way street.

Finally, a genuine bilateral partnership under the “Help China to Help China” approach also means letting China learn its own lessons. Failing to protect the environment has meant that China has paid a great cost to the people, the economy, and the nation’s resources. The experience has shaped China’s cooperation in global climate change and is helping the country become a global leader in solar energy, high-speed rail, and electric car batteries.

Comparing the two approaches, “Help China to Help China” has significant advantages. It treats China as an

implementer and helps Chinese find their own answers to their problems. It expands horizons that allow exchanges to build capacity in education, social corporate responsibility, health care, and many areas the US has experience and expertise. Suspicions of US intentions are likely to remain but, as the root of “Help China to Help China” is building Chinese capacity, solutions are Chinese, not American; that will help diminish obstacles to cooperation. Communication and cooperation in different fields and levels should always continue even – or especially -- when the two countries disagree.

Initiating “Help China to Help China” sounds hard, but it doesn't have to be. The US has already launched trial programs. In addition to the “100K Strong Initiative,” the US and China established national labs on clean energy, US think tanks and academic institutions invite Chinese scholars and NGOs to discuss their experiences in solving national problems and US environmental NGOs have begun to provide classes for Chinese local officials on low carbon urbanization.

Having the world's second largest economy and more than one third of the population living on less than \$2 a day means “China's rise” will not take the same path as that of the US or any other nation. The United States should have more faith in China's capacity. It should step back and help China to help China.

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