

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## *Xi Jinping's Reconnaissance Visit*

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Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping's visit to the United States this week has been primarily a "get acquainted" session for both sides. U.S. leaders wanted to assess first hand China's heir apparent as president—a leadership transition that is anticipated later this year. Xi's overall policy orientation has been the subject of more than a little speculation. His own mistreatment during the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the fact that close family members reside in democratic countries, and his emphasis on pragmatic solutions to problems all suggest that a Xi administration is likely to be moderate at home and reasonably cooperative with the outside world. However, his extremely close ties with the People's Liberation Army and some rather angry verbal outbursts at the West lead to concerns that his leadership might turn out to be more hard-line than that of current president Hu Jintao or Hu's predecessor, Jiang Zemin.

Xi's meetings in the United States provided at least some potential for policymakers to gain a better impression of the man and his policy orientation. But it can be only a sketchy, preliminary impression.

The Chinese media and policy elites also seem to regard Xi's visit as primarily a get acquainted session, but one that could modestly soothe diplomatic tensions between China and the United States. A few days before his departure, *China Daily* stated that the vice president's goal was to address the "trust deficit" with the United States that had developed in the past year or so. That is not surprising. Beijing is showing increasing concern about the Obama administration's confrontational rhetoric on a growing number of issues. U.S. irritation involves matters ranging from the value of China's currency and the protection of American intellectual property rights to Beijing's stance on the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs and the violence in Syria. Perhaps more important, Xi had an incentive to attempt to ascertain in his conversations whether the much ballyhooed U.S. foreign policy "pivot" toward Asia is merely a new patina on a long-standing policy or is a code term for a new military containment policy directed against China.

The fact that both sides seem to have treated the visit primarily as a reconnaissance mission has annoyed some prominent American political and policy figures who want more substantive, candid discussions. And by candid, they typically mean brusque demands for China to change its policies on the issues mentioned above as well as clean up its act on domestic human rights. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, Mitt Romney derided President Obama's meeting with Xi as "empty pomp" and accused the Obama administration of being "a near supplicant" in its relations with Beijing.

But expectations for more substantive discussions during Xi's visit were unrealistic and premature. At this point Hu, not Xi, is still the primary decision maker in China's government. Moreover, although Xi is the heir apparent, his elevation to the presidency is not guaranteed. Some Taiwanese press outlets contend that he has significant opposition—supposedly from hard-

line elements in the Communist Party who worry that he may be too reformist domestically and too accommodating to the West on foreign policy issues. The accuracy of such analyses is open to question, but given the lack of transparency in China's political system, it is a scenario that can't be dismissed out of hand.

In any event, Xi has multiple incentives to protect his political flanks at home by confining his visit to polite, get acquainted diplomacy. That is what he has done, and both Obama administration officials and the Chinese media have portrayed the trip as a success. Given its constraints and limited objectives on both sides, that appears to be the case.