

China's growing muscularity suggests a relationship rethink

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Barack Obama exiting Air Force One by the back stairs because the Chinese failed to provide the red carpeted-front stairs customary for a presidential visit was not the take-away image China had in mind for the recent G20 summit in Hangzhou.

The money shot, from China's point of view, was rather President Xi Jinping and Obama in a lakeside pagoda after a late night stroll, facing each other on lacquered wooden chairs sipping tea. It was this picture of two great powers - the declining, and the ascendant - sitting side-by-side and apparently at ease, that China wanted us to see. And who but China could have the upper hand in a setting so redolent of the longevity and refinement of Chinese civilisation?



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Chinese President Xi Jinping meet at the West Lake State Guest House in Hangzhou ahead of the G20 leaders' summit.. Photo: AP

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The plane stairs incident was likely more stuff-up than snub, because it was in both sides' interests for the visit to be seen to go as smoothly as possible. Obama had a legacy to protect. For his part President Xi wanted to minimise unpleasantness over China's aggressive expansionism in the South China Sea.



China's relations with both the US and Australia too are entering a new, more difficult phase.

Despite sticking points such as the South China Sea, cyberhacking and human rights, the Obama presidency may come to be seen as a benign period in US-China relations in light of what's to come. He has attempted to maintain open dialogue and find common ground, notably on fighting climate change. His "pivot" to East Asia was a significant effort to counterbalance Chinese power in the region and its economic centrepiece, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, offered the chance of a set of rules, standards and norms for trade and investment which if China joined could have given smaller nations more protection than they will be able to negotiate with it in bilateral deals.

Both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have disavowed the TPP so as to be seen to be protecting American jobs and it is unlikely to pass a hostile Congress. That may be one of the few positives China sees from either a Clinton or a Trump presidency.

Trump's allergy to alliances and fondness for strongmen plays to China's interests, yet his rashness and contempt for the rules of the game bode for instability, a big negative. Clinton is not popular with Beijing, for pushing for the pivot as Secretary of State and for asserting a US role in the South China Sea by declaring, at the ASEAN regional forum in 2010, the US "national interest" in freedom of the seas and opposing the use of force and coercion in settling claims in those waters.

When they met on the sidelines of the G20, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull urged President Xi to peacefully resolve the South China Sea dispute "in accordance with international law". That means respecting the July judgment of the International Court

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of Arbitration that China's claim has no legal basis. Mr Xi reportedly responded that Australia should respect China's core interests. On the other current point of contention between us - the knockback of bids by separate Chinese companies to acquire part of the electricity network Ausgrid, and the cattle company Kidman and Co - President Xi asked Australia to provide a "fair, transparent and predictable policy environment" for foreign investors.

That's fair enough. The better gauge of China's current unhappiness with Australia came in a strongly worded July editorial in the official Chinese media outlet the Global Times, which warned "If Australia steps into the South China Sea waters, it would be an ideal target for China to warn and strike".

It was a reminder that we are far less important to our largest trading partner than it is to us. Apart from trade, we rely on China to talk sense to North Korea over its "maniacal" nuclear provocations. Bates Gill, ANU Professor of Asia-Pacific Strategic Studies, argues there is a growing risk that the Australia-China relationship will sour from here. As China becomes bolder in its ambition, our politicians cannot avoid responding to alarm over Chinese foreign investment and the type of influence-peddling highlighted by the Sam Dastyari affair. Questions that were overlooked when the economic times were good will need to be debated. Amid a deepening sense of unease about what kind of partner China is, we are entering a period of welcome sharper scrutiny of how our economic interests can best be balanced with our core civic values and national security.

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