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During his trip to Asia, President Barack Obama laid out a grand rhetorical vision for the future: a U.S.-China partnership working together to solve the world's most pressing issues. Speaking in Japan, [Obama declared](#), "America will approach China with a focus on our interests. It's precisely for this reason that it is important to pursue pragmatic cooperation with China on issues of mutual concern, because no one nation can meet the challenges of the 21st century alone, and the United States and China will both be better off when we are able to meet them together."

It sounds very dramatic, almost like a form of co-dominion, with two global powers sharing the burdens of maintaining the international order.

There's just one small problem, of course: That is not what the United States is offering.

Washington still hopes that China will be satisfied with a "reformed" global system, one that might give Beijing a greater say in world affairs but would leave the United States in the position of chairman of the board (and the principal agenda-setter to boot). This is why Li Hongmei, an editor at People's Daily Online, [characterizes the president's rhetoric](#) as part of the same general U.S. strategy of "setting a limit on China's rise and growth by offering definitions and assessments of China's role in the international system. This also reflects the paradox in American logic: On the one hand, it needs China's leverage to combat the thorny problems facing all -- like climate change, nuclear threat and terrorism; while on the other hand, it will be on guard against China's rise as a global power, which they fear would overshadow the U.S."

So when an American president or secretary of state pays ritual homage to China "working together" with the United States to solve the world's problems, what the Chinese leadership hears is that Beijing should assume more burdens in the service of American plans.

That's not likely to happen. My colleague Christopher Marsh has noted that, for the last two

decades, Beijing has carefully studied the course of U.S.-Russia relations. The Chinese remain suspicious about flowery U.S. rhetoric describing partnership and cooperation, having concluded that Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin made important concessions to Washington in return for rhetorical commitments and only partially-fulfilled promises of assistance.

On a related note, Chinese scholars have carefully studied the events surrounding the unification of Germany -- specifically, Russia's claims that in return for Moscow accepting the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, the United States promised not to expand NATO eastward. This helps guide China's thinking about the value of retaining buffer states like North Korea.

It is very true that Obama's visit was greeted with guarded optimism about the future of Sino-American relations, particularly his statements that Washington is not seeking to derail China's rise. But if the president hoped that his remarks would induce Beijing to move closer to U.S. positions -- on North Korea, Sudan, Iran, climate change, trade and revaluing the yuan -- then his expectations are not likely to be met.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang made a point of stressing the importance of U.S.-China negotiations occurring on an "equal basis" between both parties. Meanwhile, Shi Yinghong, director for the Center for American Studies at Renmin University, made it a point to stress, "The U.S. is not able to force its agenda on China anymore." [He further observed](#) , "China will become more self-confident about handling pressure from the U.S. It will still cooperate, but there's less a sense that concessions on these issues define the bilateral relationship." After meeting with Obama, Chinese President Hu Jintao reiterated Beijing's stance: A wide range of issues can and should be discussed "in a spirit of equality . . . and non-interference in each other's internal affairs."

Now that Obama has concluded his meetings with Hu and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, the Chinese leadership will have to consider a fundamental question: Will a closer embrace of Washington and of the Obama administration in particular enhance China's economic position or security interests?

China believes its growing clout, especially in economic terms, means that it does not have to accommodate every U.S. preference. During past presidential visits, Beijing felt it necessary to defer to U.S. sensibilities by releasing jailed dissidents or conceding on a trade issue. By contrast, this time China did not even engage in these ritual acts, feeling that the balance of

power has more decisively shifted in Beijing's favor. Increasingly, Chinese leaders expect that if they extend support on a given issue to accommodate Washington's preferences, it should be matched by reciprocal American consideration of Beijing's interests.

One of the areas where the two countries made some progress -- agreements concerning cooperation on energy and climate change -- nonetheless shows how the future of Chinese-American relations are likely to progress: a series of quid pro quo arrangements. The United States permits the transfer of high technology products to China (e.g., Peabody Energy installing the latest carbon capture and storage technology in a Chinese coal-fired power plant); China exports goods that can be used in energy-saving projects covered by the stimulus legislation (such as General Electric being able to license Chinese components for use in federally sponsored high-speed rail construction). Beijing ends up buying more U.S. goods and services, while Washington permits the export of more of the technology upon which America's leading edge is based.

What other such arrangements might be in store? One can envision a whole series of compromise arrangements -- on Iran, on trade, etc. But they would require the United States to sacrifice some of its preferences in return, or else offer concessions in other areas. China's foreign policy thinkers have coined the term *heping yanbian* to refer to what they have identified as a key American strategy. Usually translated as "peaceful evolution," it refers to America's efforts to bring about regime change in other countries with an eye to extending one's political and economic influence. It is not accidental, then, that a leading tenet of Chinese policy is defending the sovereignty of other states. So the outlines of a Sino-American deal on Iran might follow the Libya model: China supports the de-weaponization of Tehran -- but in return, America leaves the regime alone (and certainly doesn't interfere with China's ability to gain much-needed energy from the mullahs).

Americans hoped that as China modernized and developed, its foreign policy preferences would converge with those of the United States. But this has not happened. Increasingly, China's help is becoming indispensable for those issues identified as most critical for U.S. interests. And obtaining that help is going to require something American statesmen haven't had to do since the days of the Cold War: old-fashioned horse trading.

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The Realist Prism: Horse Trading with Beijing

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