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Why Obama Must Go to China

It would be a showstopper if Obama made China his first presidential trip abroad and brought top officials.

Jeffrey E. Garten

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As an investment banker and then as Chairman and Chief Executive of Goldman Sachs, Henry Paulson had extensive experience with the Middle Kingdom and developed strong relationships with top Chinese leaders. As U.S. Treasury secretary over the last two and a half years he spent an enormous amount of his political capital trying to bring Washington and Beijing closer together, shuttling between the two cities twice a year, bringing together dozens of ministers from both countries, hammering away at such issues as currency relationships, trade openings, energy, climate change, aviation agreements, and food and product safety. Last week he co-chaired his last meeting of the U.S. China Strategic Economic Dialogue, which he established when he took office. For all this effort, Paulson deserves credit on two scores: he kept a comprehensive and friendly exchange with Beijing going at a time when the Bush administration was distracted with Iraq, Iran and other issues in the Middle East; and he discouraged Congress from enacting retaliatory action against China's rising trade surplus with the United States. Yet progress with China was generally modest, and Paulson's efforts reveal that even a powerful and determined cabinet-level official, even one with such vast ties to Chinese officials, can do only so much.

In the years ahead, the United States must do better than that. Here's how to begin: Barack Obama's first overseas trip should be to China, and it should occur within a month after his inauguration on January 20. He should bring Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and his ambassador to Beijing. Such a trip would be a showstopper, breaking all precedents.

The majority of new U.S. presidents—including FDR, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Reagan and Clinton—have gone first to Canada, however briefly. George H. W. Bush went to Ottawa for six hours. (Carter went to Britain.) George W. Bush broke the mold by choosing Mexico, sending a message about change and the importance of Latin America to his administration. Obama could do the same for China.

In bringing his seniormost entourage, the president would be doing what no American president has ever done with any country: demonstrating that he will be personally overseeing the relationship with another nation. He would be showing that the deepening of friendships now trump American preoccupation with problem countries, in large part because we need close allies to solve the big challenges.

Obama said little about China during the presidential campaign, and so he need make no embarrassing policy U-turns. This is in clear contrast to Bill Clinton, who came into office having referred time and again to the "butchers of Beijing." It is also different from the hawkish stand of George W. Bush who before his first election refused to think of China as a potential partner and instead labeled it a "strategic competitor." Obama's clean slate would give him the latitude to build positive ties from the beginning.

Critics could say that an early trip would lack the necessary preparation of such diplomatic overtures. The National Security Council will not have done its extensive interagency studies, and the inevitable turf battles among State, Defense and Treasury will not have been resolved. But the trip would not be designed to negotiate or resolve specific issues. Instead, Obama would be setting the style and the tone of a new U.S. approach to China before the bureaucracy does it for him.

Naysayers might also complain that this is no time for the president to be traveling 13 time zones away when he should be at home tending to the economic meltdown or the crisis on the Indian subcontinent. But that misses the significance of China's overwhelming importance to U.S. domestic and international interests. With its \$2 trillion of reserves and its central role in global trade and investment, China is critical to the resolution of the global economic and financial crisis that is enveloping the United States and the rest of the world, not to mention the subsequent recovery. China's potential influence on Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, the United Nations and other international institutions make Beijing a key to the handling of virtually every major global political challenge we face. With its soaring industrialization and appetite for energy, there is no solution to the threat of climate change without China's central participation. At this delicate time in the history of capitalism, moreover, the path that China adopts—market orientation vs. heavy-handed state control—could well determine what system much of the emerging world will embrace.

Obama campaigned on the promise of fundamental change. With one early trip to China, he could show he meant it.

Garten is the Juan Trippe Professor of International Trade and Finance at the Yale School of Management and was undersecretary of commerce for international trade in the Clinton administration.

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