

Chinese president's visit underscores Washington-Beijing tensions

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The four-day visit to the United States by Chinese President Hu Jintao, culminating in Thursday's White House meeting with George W. Bush, produced little progress on any of the key issues in dispute between the two world powers. Instead, there was evidence of growing tension as the Bush White House inflicted a series of diplomatic snubs, ranging from the trivial to the flagrant, recorded in detail by the US media, and undoubtedly noted by the visitors from Beijing.

Despite Chinese requests, Hu's session at the White House was not accorded the status of a full state visit, with an evening state dinner and associated ceremony, a distinct step down from the treatment accorded Hu's predecessors Jiang Zemin and Deng Xiaoping during previous visits to Washington by a Chinese head of state.

When the Chinese national anthem was played to welcome Hu, the White House announcer described the country as "the Republic of China," the official name for Taiwan, rather than the "Peoples Republic of China," the title of the Beijing regime. Given that the status of Taiwan is the number-one foreign policy issue for China, this can hardly have been an oversight.

More significant was the decision of White House officials to permit a prominent activist of the banned Falun Gong organization to participate in the joint press conference of Bush and Hu, which she then interrupted by shouting denunciations of the repression of the quasi-religious group. Wengyi Wang, a Chinese-born doctor who lives in New York City, was admitted to the press conference on a one-day pass issued to the Falun Gong's newspaper, *Epoch Times*, which recently carried a series of articles, written by Wang, alleging that Chinese authorities were harvesting the organs of imprisoned Falun Gong disciples.

For several minutes, Wang stood on a camera platform shouting, in English and Chinese, "President Hu! Your days are numbered," "President Bush! Stop him from killing!" and other anti-Beijing slogans. She tried to unfurl a banner. Secret Service agents finally removed her, and she was later arraigned before a magistrate on charges of attempting to intimidate or threaten a foreign official, which carry a sentence of up to six months in jail.

Given the current security mania in Washington, it is

inconceivable that the decision to give press credentials to a Falun Gong activist—one with a record of heckling the previous Chinese president, Jiang Zemin, at an appearance in Malta in 2001—was made unwittingly. The White House routinely denies access to such events, not merely to those suspected of an intention of disruption, but to journalists from socialist and antiwar publications, who might ask embarrassing questions.

Only three months ago, Capitol Hill police arrested Iraq war activist Cindy Sheehan for wearing an antiwar t-shirt at Bush's State of the Union Speech, which she attended as the guest of a Democratic congresswoman. While Secret Service agents took three minutes to get to the Falun Gong representative (a *Washington Post* columnist commented that their strategy seemed to have been to let her shout herself hoarse), they would have been far quicker to grab and silence a heckler denouncing Bush for having blood on his hands in Iraq.

Even after the fact, Bush administration officials defended the decision to give Wang a press pass, presenting it as an example of their commitment to democracy and a free press. One told the *Los Angeles Times*, "We can't go around denying access to reporters when we're going around the world trumpeting that to do so is incorrect." This from an administration that is currently engaged in investigating leaks on secret CIA torture prisons and illegal domestic spying by the National Security Agency, in which both the journalists and their whistle-blower sources could face imprisonment.

The most ominous indication of US-China conflict, far more serious than the diplomatic slights, came in a statement little noted by the media, issued by the Pentagon on the day Hu visited the White House, confirming that the US military regards China as a dangerous potential adversary and is repositioning its forces to deal with a future military confrontation with Beijing. Bryan Whitman, a spokesman for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, told reporters that the Pentagon remained concerned about "a lack of transparency and some uncertainty surrounding China's future path. Therefore, we and others have to naturally hedge against the unknown."

Whitman was responding to questions generated by reports this week in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Times*, both publications closely linked to the right-wing forces

directing the Bush administration, that the Pentagon has increasingly focused its long-range military planning and preparations on the likelihood of conflict with China. This includes shifting forces from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region and increasing both aircraft carrier and submarine fleets in the Pacific.

According to these reports, one key change involves new maintenance procedures for Navy warships to keep four aircraft carrier battle groups on station in the Pacific at the same time. Another involves the shifting of 8,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam, the US island territory in the western Pacific that is being built up as a center for long-range bombers, spy aircraft and logistical support operations.

These measures were hardly mentioned in the press coverage of the US-China summit, and there was no hint of the possibility of mutual annihilation in the carefully orchestrated public statements by Bush and Hu. The 10,000 nuclear weapons in the US arsenal could destroy not only China, but all life on earth. For its part, China has hundreds of nuclear weapons, together with missiles that can reach most major US cities.

The danger of a military conflict between the United States and China, with all its potentially cataclysmic consequences, does not arise out of the personalities of Bush or Hu, but out of deep-going objective contradictions. The same economic forces that have produced an ever-greater integration of the US and Chinese economies—perhaps the highest expression of the overall globalization of the world economy—lead inevitably to conflicts between these two powers over access to natural resources, control of key strategic positions and, ultimately, world power.

From the early 1980s, the major imperialist powers—the US, Japan, the European powers—have poured capital into China, building China up as an offshore manufacturing platform that plays a decisive role in their class strategy, allowing them to put unrelenting pressure on labor costs and generating super-profits. The growth of world capitalism over the past quarter century is largely bound up with the opening up of China.

But this same process has generated a challenge to US domination of the Asia-Pacific region. The growing industrial and financial might of China increases its strategic weight in world affairs and makes possible a more ambitious program of armament, diplomacy and cultivation of economic ties. US imperialism reacts to China's rise as a threat to its hegemony all along the eastern shore of Asia, as well as in the Indian Ocean and even in Africa and South America.

For all the ritualistic invocations of democracy by American politicians, the US-China conflict has nothing to do with any repressive actions on the part of the Stalinist dictatorship in Beijing. On the contrary, maintenance of China as an almost inexhaustible supplier of cheap labor for international capital requires an internal political regime that denies workers any democratic rights and suppresses all opposition to the most

brutal sweatshop methods.

Corporate America relies on the Beijing dictatorship to police and suppress the Chinese workers as well as to provide an increasingly important market for the sale of US goods. Hu Jintao's trip was clearly intended by the Chinese leadership to showcase this relationship. The Chinese president spent two days in Seattle, meeting with corporate executives, touring the Boeing aircraft factory and dining with Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates. In Washington, after his chilly reception at the White House, Hu was the guest of honor at a dinner sponsored by the US-China Business Council, where he was introduced by former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, an architect of the turn by US imperialism to cultivate Beijing in the early 1970s. More than 900 corporate executives attended the dinner, while several dozen more were guests at the White House luncheon.

China has, if anything, proceeded extremely cautiously in response to the US drive to seize control of the oil resources of the Persian Gulf and Caspian basin, even though these are vital to the future development of the Chinese economy. Clearly, Beijing would rather use diplomatic and economic methods than risk a confrontation with Washington.

The Bush administration's policy, however, has been considerably more provocative, with top officials like Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Rice suggesting that China must have some dark and ulterior motive for building up its military forces—which remain far inferior technologically to the United States. There is a considerable degree of recklessness in this posturing, not only because of the danger of sparking military conflict, but because of China's growing role in the world financial system.

China has accumulated the world's largest foreign currency reserves, surpassing Japan this year. The Chinese central bank holds more than \$1 trillion, currently mostly in dollars, although it has begun, at least on a small scale, to shift some of these reserves into euros and the Japanese yen. As the *New York Times* observed in a commentary on Hu's trip, "If China were to begin a fire sale of these and other American securities—perhaps as part of a policy to loosen the yuan's peg to the dollar—American interest rates could increase significantly, delivering a powerful blow to the housing market and consumer spending." This in turn would undermine the ability of consumers and US corporations to pay their debts, with incalculable consequences for financial markets worldwide.



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