

**XI JINPING'S VISIT TO THE
UNITED STATES AND
CHINA-US RELATIONS**

LYE Liang Fook & WU Dan

EAI Background Brief No. 700

Date of Publication: 21 February 2012

Executive Summary

1. The United States is China's most important bilateral partner. Hence, the foremost consideration in China's foreign policy is to maintain stable relations with the US.
2. Having stable relations with the US is even more important this year because a new leadership led by Xi Jinping is expected to take over from Hu Jintao. Stable ties with the US would facilitate a smooth leadership transition and allow the new leadership to continue to focus on the domestic agenda.
3. It is in this context that Xi embarked on his visit to the US in February 2012. In doing so, Xi has followed the footsteps of Hu Jintao, who also visited the US as the Chinese vice president in 2002 before he became the General Secretary of the Party in the same year.
4. Xi's visit has burnished his credentials as a world statesman who is able to hold his own in talks with US President Barack Obama and other leaders. To the US audience, Xi generally came across as confident, affable, down-to-earth and approachable.
5. More importantly, to the domestic audience in China, Xi's greatest challenge during the visit was to strike a balance between building ties with the US and articulating China's interests. He seemed to have managed this balance well and concluded the visit without any apparent missteps. This is an achievement for Xi.
6. When pressed publicly on sensitive issues during his US trip, Xi was calm and measured in his response. On China's human rights record, for instance, Xi asserted that China has made "tremendous and well-recognized achievements" in this area for more than 30 years and will continue to do so despite the internal challenges it faced.

7. Xi also succeeded in networking with top decision-makers in the US and projected a pro-people image with his reunion with the family that hosted him twenty-seven years ago. His visit to a high school and attendance at a Lakers basketball game further endeared him to the masses.
8. Whether there would be more stable relations between China and the US in the wake of Xi's visit remains to be seen. The forthcoming US presidential and congressional elections can be expected to whip up more anti-China sentiments or even anti-China measures.
9. The US pivot to the Asia-Pacific region has also raised heckles in China. Some believe this is a strategy to contain China. Officially, China's response has been milder compared to views expressed in other quarters. Xi himself has called on the US to focus on the economic well-being of the region and less on the military dimension.
10. If China-US relations remain stable in the months ahead, this would be another feather in the cap for Xi and lend credibility to his rise to the pinnacle of power in China. If relations become rocky, it may dent Xi's credibility somewhat, but not undermine his rise to the top.