

Staring down Obama

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That China and the Obama administration have begun their engagement on a quarrelsome note on the currency issue is not necessarily an indicator of the direction of their bilateral relations in the next four years. For Obama's two predecessors in the White House began as lions roaring against China but ended up as friendly purring cats. President Bill Clinton began his first term in the early 1990s by denouncing Chinese leaders as "butchers of Beijing" for their crackdown on Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. During his eight years at the helm, Clinton gave China the permanent access to the American market, eased its entry into the World Trade Organisation, and declared Beijing as America's strategic partner in Asia. George W. Bush came to office declaring that China was not a strategic partner of the United States, but a potential competitor. As his attention turned towards the Middle East after 9/11, Bush avoided a confrontation with China.

When he was leaving office this month, Bush and his aides were taking credit for building a productive relationship with China. What we can say at this moment is that the balance of power between America and China has steadily altered over the last sixteen years, giving Beijing a lot more leeway in the relationship. A recent cartoon in the Chinese press summed up the new situation. It showed Obama dressed as super-man' asking his Chinese girl friend' for money, yet again. The coy girl friend says she would be prudent rather than obedient when it comes to money. Conscious of the shift in what the communists call the correlation of forces', Beijing is unlikely to take American criticism lying down. Its reaction, for example, to the statements of the new US Treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner accusing Beijing of manipulating the value of its currency to the disadvantage of Washington, was quick and dismissive. Beijing is surely aware of the deep divisions within America on how to deal with China. While some in the Obama Administration want to blame China for the current financial crisis, others argue that Washington must be more than nice to Beijing, since it has few other alternatives. Trust Beijing to take full advantage of the unsettled situation in Washington. Patronising Europe Premier Wen Jiabao's extended tour of Europe this week has been billed by the Chinese media as a "journey of confidence". At a time when the western world is reeling under a massive crisis, Wen does not have to be too subtle in reminding the European leaders that they need Chinese cooperation in saving western capitalism'. Wen arrives first in Switzerland for bilateral business and making a major speech at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos. He then travels to Germany, Spain and Britain, and will also stop by to meet the European Union leaders in Brussels. In a deliberate snub to the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who angered Beijing late last year by meeting the Dalai Lama, Wen is not traveling to Paris. By putting France down, China is signalling to the rest of Europe that it can't have it both ways - of talking tough on human rights to China and seeking its cooperation when convenient or necessary. In that sense, Wen's journey of confidence' is about underlining the changing power balance between Brussels and Beijing. Building media power While the new US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton talks of smart power - a more effective combination of hard and soft power - China is racing ahead to boost its global media clout. Beijing is planning to hand out more than two billion US dollars each to its state media monopolies to raise their international profile and augment China's soft power. The state television company CCTV, which last year opened channels in French and Spanish, now plans to have Arabic and Russian broadcasts. The Chinese news agency, Xinhua is expected to double its international bureaus and bring them up to 200. Xinhua is also expected to start a 24 hour news channel to compete with CNN and BBC. Meanwhile the Chinese Communist Party's paper, the People's Daily, is planning to launch an English edition of its international newspaper, The Global Times. With

the big American media in financial doldrums and the Indian media (the only one in Asia with strong depth at home and a potential global reach) dumbing itself down, Chinese media is determined to meet Beijing's demands for intellectual power projection across the world.