

How Xi Can Repair China's Global Reputation

By [Andrew Hammond](#)

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Presidents Xi Jinping and Barack Obama concluded their first summit on Sunday in California. For both leaders, the meeting appears to have been successful and accords were reached on cyber security and military to military communication.

Perhaps the most interesting joint pledge, however, is to build, in the words of Xi, a "new model of cooperation" between the two nations. As the Chinese president elaborated, "China and the United States must find a new path ... one that is different from the inevitable confrontation and conflict between the major countries of the past."

Xi's emphasis on this subject reflects the critical mission he has inherited to enhance China's image in the world. The central challenge he faces is that China's soft power has lagged far behind its hard power built on its growing economic and military might.

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This soft-power deficit could prove a big headache for the new Chinese president because there is increasing international concern, suspicion and even outright hostility as China's international role expands. In the U.S., for example, the public's favorable attitude toward China fell by more than one-fifth in one year — to 40 percent in 2012 from 51 percent in 2011 — according to Pew Global Research Projects.

At a time of continued economic uncertainty in the U.S., issues such as China's alleged currency manipulation, the large size of the U.S. trade deficit with China, the large U.S. financial debt held by China and alleged Chinese cyber security attacks on U.S. interests has taken its toll on U.S. public opinion.

In Japan, meanwhile, public favorability toward China fell from 34 percent to 15 percent between 2012 and 2011, according to Pew. With Japanese distrust of China growing, Tokyo is actively strengthening its diplomatic alliances, particularly with Washington, as it seeks to balance Beijing's growing economic and military strength.

In this context, Xi rightly recognizes the need for better diplomacy and communications to enable stronger international understanding and appreciation of the country. His summit with Obama was thus an unprecedented opportunity to begin the journey to repair China's global reputation.

What must China do if it is to succeed in this journey during Xi's presidency?

In the short term, Xi now needs to follow up on China's ambition to build an enhanced relationship with the U.S. and restart a broader process of addressing growing foreign concerns about the country's intentions as a nascent super power. In this area, Xi will need to double down on long-standing Chinese pledges of securing a harmonious, peaceful transition as China rises and becomes a responsible stakeholder in the international system.

Beyond the U.S.-Chinese summit, there is a huge forward agenda for China to tackle that will require commitment to meaningful reform during Xi's presidency. If this happens, China will be able to potentially secure significantly more dividends from the sizable sums of money it already spends on foreign charm offensives.

Perhaps the most difficult issue to be addressed is the yawning gap between China's attractive culture and traditions and modern achievements such as its scientific progress, which is a significant source of soft power, and the Communist regime's domestic policies. One case in point was the stunning staging of the 2008 Olympics. The elaborate opening ceremonies celebrated both traditional and modern Chinese culture and society, while underlining Beijing's efficiency to stage major events.

Successful as those Olympics were, though, Beijing squandered much of the soft-power dividends generated when it clamped down on the uprising and protests that same year in Tibet and Xinjiang. This counter-productive pattern is by no means isolated. Beijing needs to recognize this to avoid what looks like a tendency to shoot itself in the foot going forward.

This requires commitment to political change, transparency and concrete steps toward democratization, while matching its words with concrete deeds. Much of the international community is unlikely to welcome China as a peaceful, responsible world power if Beijing regularly clamps down on Chinese citizens seeking domestic reform, including political dissidents, lawyers, human rights activists and journalists.

A second issue for China is that there has traditionally been too little emphasis on public diplomacy efforts to reach out directly to foreign publics. Instead, Beijing has often placed emphasis, especially in Africa and the Middle East, on improving working relationships with strategically important governments through assistance programs that may not always serve the interest of local peoples.

Yet this is now changing. China has rapidly developed public diplomacy skills and policies. At the same time, however, more change is urgently needed if hearts and minds are to be won across the world.

Perhaps the biggest reform necessary for Xi is reducing the role of the state, which still initiates most of China's public diplomacy. The central problem is that state-driven public diplomacy often lacks legitimacy and credibility. One solution is expanding the numbers of individuals and non-state groups involved in public diplomacy, including from civil society networks, Chinese diaspora communities, student and academic groups and business networks.

The challenges facing China are wide-ranging and deep-seated and clearly will require far more than one summit to overcome. Indeed, enhancing China's reputation is a generational task that will require not only sustained investment but also significant reform during Xi's presidency.

Andrew Hammond is an associate partner at ReputationInc.

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