

# A Changed China Awaits Mr. Obama

**BYLINE:** By NICHOLAS KRISTOF.

PRESIDENT OBAMA hasn't even begun his state visit to China and he has already been mocked.

"U.S. public opinion has downgraded Obama," a state-run Chinese newspaper, Global Times, editorialized about Tuesday's election. "He has done an insipid job, offering nearly nothing to his supporters. U.S. society has grown tired of his banality."

What a welcome! Global Times is often shrill, but that tone reflects the way President Xi Jinping is tugging his regime in a more nationalistic, assertive and hard-line direction.

The regime also gave a cold shoulder in September to former President Jimmy Carter, initially trying to block Chinese universities from hosting him. Xi and his No. 2 both declined to meet Carter -- even though Carter is the one who established U.S.-Chinese diplomatic relations in 1979.

Then there's something a bit more personal: China doesn't seem to want to give me a visa.

I've been visiting China for more than 30 years and lived in Beijing for five. I speak Mandarin and have been alternately hailed by Chinese authorities and detained by them. But I've had cordial relations with the last few foreign ministers, and, until now, I've always received visas.

The Chinese leadership is blocking some visas for New York Times employees because it is upset by Times coverage of profiteering by families of senior officials. It was particularly irritated by Times articles showing that relatives of the former prime minister had amassed \$2.7 billion.

Xi has been ruling China for two years now, and he has shown some inclination toward economic and legal reforms. Two years ago, I thought Xi might open things up a bit. Boy, was I wrong! Instead, it increasingly seems that Xi may deepen reforms in some areas but, over all, is a tough-minded nationalist who takes a hard line on multiple fronts so as to challenge nearly everything that Obama stands for:

In the East China and South China Seas, Xi has taken an aggressive approach to maritime disputes. There may be a thaw, but risk remains of military accidents, escalation and even war.

At home, he has overseen harsh repression of dissidents; activists who once were tolerated are now imprisoned. The brave lawyer Xu Zhiyong was this year sentenced to four years in prison, and China not only imprisons the Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo but also torments his wife, Liu Xia, with extrajudicial house arrest.

The government has tightened controls on the Internet, blocking not only nytimes.com but also Facebook and YouTube -- and making it hard to use Gmail, Google Drive and Google Calendar.

Deng Xiaoping accepted technologies that brought political risks because they would help the economy, but Xi seems willing to sacrifice business convenience for more rigid political control.

Xi comes across as cocky and proud that China is now booming and strong, and he has been willing to poke his finger in the American eye. In 2009, he derided "well-fed foreigners who have nothing better to do than lecture us about our own affairs."

All this creates a challenge for Obama. The United States doesn't have many China experts in senior roles, and neither in Beijing nor Washington are many officials fighting for an improved relationship. Meanwhile, the two sides are battling behind the scenes over Chinese cyberwarfare against American targets.

When Obama first traveled to Beijing in 2009, his efforts at conciliation were perceived as signs of weakness, and China then overplayed its hand, Washington responded and relations suffered.

The world needs China to step up and play a constructive role (an excellent example is China's plan to build an Ebola hospital in Liberia), especially on climate change. But Xi's vision of the China-U.S. relationship is that America keeps mum about Chinese abuses and irresponsible behavior.

When Xi traveled to Tanzania last year, members of his delegation bought thousands of pounds of illegal, poached ivory from slaughtered elephants, according to a report this month by the Environmental Investigation Agency. These purchases were so huge that the price of ivory doubled on the black market, the group said. This stockpile of illegal ivory was then smuggled to Beijing by diplomatic pouch on the president's official plane, the agency said.

Chinese officials vociferously denied the report, but the episode is a reminder how much China increasingly matters worldwide, for good or for ill. From the global economy to the survival of elephants to carbon emissions, China today affects almost everything everywhere.

So for those of us who love the Middle Kingdom, it's sad to see it veer toward a nationalistic and repressive line under Xi. Obama won't be able to change China, but he has too often signaled weakness in the Middle East and Ukraine. In China, he should stand firm.