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The Three Noes and Four Noes

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Many readers will remember the “three noes.” In June 1998, speaking at Shanghai Library midway through his nine-day tour of China, US President Bill Clinton—then mired in a sex scandal with an intern—remarked on the “three noes” in reference to the Taiwan issue, the main concern in US-China relations at the time. Why did President Clinton bring up the Taiwan issue at this juncture? The answer lies in the Taiwan Strait crisis between the two countries in March 1996, two years prior to the visit. Addressing Chinese participants in a roundtable discussion, President Clinton remarked that the United States did not support Taiwanese independence, acknowledge the government of Taiwan, or support its admission to international organizations. George W. Bush, who won the US presidency in 2001 after a neck-and-neck race with Democratic candidate Al Gore, initially opted to ignore the three noes. When the September 11 terrorist attacks took place later that year, though, he launched a global battle against terrorism and adhered to the three noes to gain China’s cooperation.

The three noes can be counted among the successes in US-China relations. No military tensions have arisen across the Taiwan Strait since 1996. This is a remarkable achievement in light of the fact that Taiwan was under a Democratic Progressive Party administration for eight years from 2000. What stood in the way of then Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian, who believed in independence for Taiwan, were the three noes. After some trial and error, President Chen laid aside his aspirations for independence and sought to expand trade with continental China. Following the birth of a Kuomintang administration in 2008, newly appointed President Ma Ying-jeou immediately set out to establish exchanges with the continent—the so-called Three Links, comprising trade, transportation, and postal linkages. Since then, personnel and economic exchanges between China and Taiwan have been rapidly growing. The road to China-Taiwan unification is long and arduous, but the days of Taiwan being the biggest issue in US-China relations are receding into the past.

Now, 17 years since the three noes, the “four noes” have emerged—albeit with little recognition thus far.

When a Chinese premier visits the United States, a relatively open opinion space emerges, if only briefly, in the official Chinese media. During President Xi Jinping’s recent US visit as well, analyses by experts on US-China relations, such as Professor Wang Jisi, director of the Center for International and Strategic Studies at Peking University, and Professor Zhu Feng of Nanjing University, were published. Both Professor Wang’s column on how China and the United States should promote co-evolution under the “two orders” (the Chinese internal order maintained by the Communist Party of China and the international order led by the United States) and Professor Zhu’s piece, “China-US Relations Must Not Be Held Hostage by the Alliance System,” offer important, thought-provoking commentaries.

The four noes appeared in a column printed in the Chinese daily *Global Times* on September 18, just before President Xi departed for the United States. The article was titled “The United States Must Understand Four Principles” (published in English as “Misguided US Policies Can’t Shake China”). Compared to the above pieces by the two professors, the title of this column is conspicuously high-handed and one-sided. If a senior government official had written it, I would not have made note of it here.

My eyes, however, were inevitably fixed on the author’s name. The article was written by Professor Wu Xinbo, executive dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, the very person to whom President Clinton made his “three noes” remark in June 1998. Seventeen years ago Professor Wu, then a young scholar, had been at the receiving end of the US president’s unofficial remark. Now, many years later, his turn had come to give his two cents to the United States.

The four principles according to Professor Wu are as follows. First of all, “China’s political stability cannot be challenged.” In Professor Wu’s view, the United States is putting pressure on the Chinese government in terms of both its political system and its values at a level not seen since 1989. The second principle is that “it is unwise for the US

to overreact to China's rising influence in the Asia-Pacific region," as China's growing clout is inseparable from the revival of the Chinese people and is in the interests of other Asia-Pacific countries. The third principle is that "alliance should not be followed as a principle in coping with regional affairs." Needless to say, the United States should not be partial to Japan or the Philippines in territorial disputes. "Lastly," Professor Wu writes, "it is wrong for the US to impede China from playing an increasingly important role in international affairs." US suspicions that China is challenging the international order and attempting to change current international rules are unfounded, Wu claims.

While the three noes and four noes may use similar language, they are quite different in their substance. The three noes were an expression of US self-restraint. The United States presented a "nice" face to China, though from the standpoint of the powerful, by declaring that it would not do the things that China most despised. This gave rise to a virtuous cycle in US-China relations. The basic stance of the four noes, meanwhile, is one of superiority; it is an assertion of power on China's part. Stress is laid on China's equality with the United States. This stance is an extension of the "China that can say no," a concept that emerged in the mid-1990s. However, an attitude such as this has no chance of eliciting a "nice" response from the party to whom it is directed.

Can the "four noes" editorial be ignored, then? I believe that the article is valuable in two respects. Firstly, it offers an insight into what the minimum objective—the bottom line—of President Xi's September 2015 visit to the United States was. This is expressed in the first principle raised by Professor Wu. The main point that the Xi administration wishes to convey to the United States is China's internal stability. To get this message across, it has wound down its anti-corruption campaign and held a military parade on September 3. China sent invitations to 49 countries, of which 47 (excluding Japan and the Philippines) took part in the parade in one form or another. A threat to Chinese political stability would be US interference in human rights and freedom of speech, religion, and information (particularly with regard to materials pertaining to corruption by top Communist Party officials).

Secondly, the four noes epitomize the Xi administration's style of foreign policy: namely, as the Taiwanese liberal magazine *The Journalist* has noted, to start by displaying a

hard-line stance to seize the initiative and forcefully set the agenda, boost domestic support by inciting nationalism, but make practical compromises in actual negotiations while touting full victory at home. Viewed from such a perspective, President Xi's US trip was a success in that he was able to complete his week-long visit without any notable conflicts or accidents on the domestic front, thus demonstrating to the world that China can maintain internal stability even in the absence of its leader.