

Huntsman takes on daunting task with China

Challenging China » Trade, climate, global security top issues

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As President Barack Obama's choice to become ambassador to China, Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. will inherit responsibility for a staggering array of issues -- from climate change to nuclear proliferation and global security to trade .

"If you go down the list of global issues that are important to the United States, there isn't a single one that the U.S. can't deal with more efficiently and effectively by working with China," said Evan Feigenbaum, a China expert with the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, D.C.

In picking the Utah Republican governor for one of the top diplomatic posts, Obama said his administration is seeking a "new era of partnership between our two nations that will advance our shared dreams of opportunity and security in America, in Asia and around the world."

"I can think of no more important assignment than creating the kinds of bridges between our two countries that will determine the well-being, not just of Americans and Chinese, but also the future of the world," the president said.

Feigenbaum, who was deputy assistant secretary of state for the region under President George W. Bush, said Huntsman will arrive in China at a "historic moment of transition," with a global economic crisis and a country that is being forced to move away from its historic reliance on exports.

In the security realm, he said, China has a unique relationship with Pakistan and the nation's support will be crucial to advancing U.S. interests. Likewise, as a neighbor to North Korea and a member of the United Nation's Security Council, China will be pivotal in trying to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, both in North Korea and Iran.

Speaking in China in 2006 while on a trade mission, Huntsman said that North Korea's pursuit of nuclear arms will "test the resolve of our strategic relationship [with China] in ways we haven't seen."

On climate change, China and the United States are now the two largest emitters of greenhouse gases. China has recently taken strides toward reducing its emissions and cleaning up its air. "If you want to do a climate deal, you have to do it with China," said Feigenbaum.

Huntsman had planned to be in China this week with other governors to meet with senior Chinese officials to discuss climate change, clean energy development and carbon capture technology. Huntsman said last month that a Chinese ambassador had told him that the trip, which was canceled because of concerns about the spread of swine flu, would likely be "the most substantive exchange between the United States and China this year."

Several Chinese provincial governors are still expected to attend the Western Governors' Association conference at Utah's Deer Valley next month.

"China is so important and, whatever administration, no matter which party you're from, this is a country that we need to deal with, and if you don't do it well, it will hurt American interests," said Yanqi Tong, a political science professor at the University of Utah and expert on China. "I think it's a very good choice because I think

that Governor Huntsman really understands China."

Huntsman has a deep passion for the Chinese culture and a background in Asian affairs that dates back to a Mormon mission he served from 1979 to 1981 in Taiwan where he learned to speak Mandarin Chinese.

He was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for East Asia in 1990 and later was nominated to be ambassador to Singapore by President George H.W. Bush.

In 2001, he became the deputy U.S. trade representative for the region at a time China was joining the World Trade Organization, negotiating trade agreements with Korea, China and Japan over a number of issues.

As governor, Huntsman spoke out in favor of Tibetan independence and supported pro-Tibetan protests in San Francisco that threatened to block the Olympic torch relay on its way to the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

He said that, while working at the Commerce Department, he participated in protests over the Chinese government's harsh crackdown on protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Lew Cramer, president of the World Trade Center Utah, said Huntsman has hosted 14 ambassadors from around the world in the last seven months and received rave reviews from many for his diplomatic skills, including Czech President Vaclav Klaus, who Cramer said wanted to appoint a consul in Utah.

"Around the world, his reputation is just stellar, absolutely stellar for international diplomacy," said Cramer. "I think he is the best man in America for this job and it's such an important bilateral relationship with China . It's the most important bilateral relationship America has in the world."

Val Hale, vice president of advancement at Utah Valley University, went with Huntsman on the trade mission to China in 2006 and was struck at how relaxed and knowledgable he was in the setting.

"Jon Huntsman is in his element in China. He was so comfortable with those dignitaries, you can tell he just thoroughly enjoyed it," said Hale. "I just thought at the time, this is really what he should be doing because he's just so good at it."

Feigenbaum said that, unlike some past ambassadors who have been picked for their political loyalties to the president, Huntsman comes to the job with a different perspective.

"I think he's someone who operates at a level politically that the Chinese will appreciate," he said.

Huntsman, who said Saturday he wasn't looking for the job, but felt it was his duty to accept the calling, committed to Obama that "we will take the U.S.-China relationship to new heights, focused not just on that which divides us, but more importantly, on that which unites us, knowing that this will be critical for lasting peace and prosperity for citizens on both sides of the Pacific."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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