

COMMENTARY

China-US Relations Under Trump: More Continuity Than Change

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PRAGMATISM HAS PREVAILED BUT SUSPENSE REMAINS. THERE IS, IN reality, more continuity than change in how China and the United States relate to each other. Such is the aggregate state of relations between the two countries seven months into the Donald Trump presidency. Work plans announced at the meeting between Trump and Xi Jinping in early April 2017 marked an end to months of suspense. In China, there was a sense of relief that US policy has not followed through—not in letter, that is—on the onerous options Mr. Trump articulated before January 19, 2017, which cover the entire spectrum of political, economic, and military ties. At the same time, hard work remains ahead to prevent the coin from flipping to the other side to conflict escalation.

For China, the rise of Trump to the US presidency has introduced a new level of unpredictability into its bilateral relationship with the United States, which is traditionally complex. Chinese foreign policy elites adopted the Western “black swan” analogy to indicate their level of unpreparedness for the arrival of a new style of head of state in the White House. But then, since the legacy of bilateral ties at the end of the Obama administration was hardly cordial and, with the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton having a track record of hawkishness toward China on East Asian regional security and Chinese domestic political issues (Dyer and Mitchell 2016), expectations for an improvement in ties had not been high, either.

In this commentary, I am going to try to situate my observations of the US-China relationship during the past half year in the context of some of the structural geopolitical issues that are certainly going to remain throughout and after the Trump administration. These

issues—over which the two sides have differences each finds difficult to walk back from—have worked to shape Chinese policies toward the United States and vice versa. The remaining question is how to manage them in order to avoid the kind of shocks that may risk a downward slide in the relationship to a point of no return.

Viewed from China, how the United States acts over Taiwan continues to be the issue that alone can define the overall level of political relationship Beijing can have with Washington, bilaterally and multilaterally. Given Taiwan's governing Democratic Progressive Party's refusal to pay even lip service to a One China orientation, an increase in Washington's contacts with Taipei does not bode well for Beijing at all. North Korea for decades has succeeded in defying calls, including those from China, to denuclearize, and it is too early to say if Trump's talk of an end to "strategic patience" can make a real difference. China should continue to work with the United States on North Korea, if only to reduce the chance for the latter to drive the wedge between the two even further. The maritime space in East Asia attracted US attention in recent years in part due to the popularity of the simplistic notion of an inevitable clash between the United States in decline and China on the rise. That notion needs to be debunked.

Taiwan

On December 2, 2016, Trump spoke by phone with Tsai Ing-wen, leader of Taiwan. This was unprecedented for a US president-elect since the United States switched its diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979. Coming on the heels of China-bashing as a key component of his campaign, few believed Trump simply found it impolite to take yet another congratulatory call from abroad on his election victory; Trump later made clear this was not the case and that the call was planned (Gearan, Rucker, and Denyer 2016).

By the time of the Trump-Tsai conversation, official contacts between Beijing and Taipei had been effectively put on hold, due to Tsai's refusal to explicitly acknowledge the "one China, respective interpretations" version of the One China principle both sides

have operated under since 1992. Under Tsai's predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou, structural ties between Taiwan and the mainland did not improve much. Yet Ma's pledge to honor the 1992 consensus served as a basis for a face-to-face meeting between him and Xi Jinping in 2015 (Ma 2015). The practical utility of such meetings is that they send a message that differences remain but can be managed by leaders on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

China did its best to display solicitude. Foreign Minister Wang Yi was the first to speak with the media in reaction to the call, quoted as saying that the phone call was a shenanigan by the Taiwan side. As a gesture of public diplomacy, this rhetorical blame on Taiwan implied that China was preserving room for sympathizing with the predicament the United States is in: the continuation of the national division of China is at the root of why the leader of Taipei today is leaning on Washington. But there was no change in Beijing's definition of One China as the foundation of political ties with Washington. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman responded to the development by repeating in a mundane manner that Beijing views the One China principle as the political foundation of China-US relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). The presence of a delegation from Taiwan at Trump's inauguration came and went (Haas 2017). It was barely mentioned in the Chinese press. So, the not so thinly implied message was that Beijing would give Trump the chance to rethink after formally assuming office.

Beneath the public calm, however, the foreign policy establishment in Beijing could not have been thrown into a deeper state of disarray. Whether by coincidence or by design, when Trump spoke with Tsai, Henry Kissinger was doing his round of meetings in Beijing (*Bloomberg* 2016). Ever since his first trip to China in 1971, throughout the various generations of Chinese leadership, Kissinger has been received by China's US policy elites as the unrivaled go-to figure for gauging the eventual direction of China debates in the United States. It is very rare for Kissinger not to receive an audience with the Chinese head of state when he travels to China. In times of uncertainty such as presidential transitions, Kissinger's presence is taken (justifiably or not) as a visit by an unofficial emissary from Washington to Beijing. It is a role

that Kissinger obviously enjoys being seen to play. Was the phone conversation part of the message old friend Kissinger was tasked to bring to Beijing by Trump during the audience he had reportedly had with the incoming president before his visit?

It was a full two months later when the air started to clear. On February 9, now as president, Trump spoke with Xi by phone. A summary of the conversation was posted on the White House homepage: “President Trump agreed, at the request of President Xi, to honor our ‘one China’ policy” (White House 2017). Although the very wording clearly indicates reservations on the part of the Trump White House, the statement was sufficient for putting an end to speculation about how much closer the White House and Taipei might move toward each other in both Chinese and US circles and beyond.

Clearly, however, the transactional manner by which Trump intends to handle the One China issue remains unchanged. In late April, Tsai suggested another phone conversation with Trump. In response to an inquiry from the media, Trump replied that he would like to check with Mr. Xi in Beijing before making a decision (Reuters 2017). In other words, Trump’s evaluation of Chinese president Xi’s performance constitutes a factor in his judgment vis-à-vis his future gestures and policies toward Taiwan. To Trump, it seems, the One China principle remains the outcome of a bargain, rather than a principle, as the Chinese side sees it because it is stated in the joint communiqués that undergird the bilateral relationship.

More Than a Tsai-Trump Call: Where Is China?

The question about where China is may seem utterly silly, at first glance. Yet different answers, from abroad and within China, provide arguably the single most influential pillar underpinning conceptual differences about China’s place in the present-day regional and world order and its future evolution. For China, debates over which party, the United States (and its allies) or China, is working to destroy a rule-based regional/international order, have to begin with finding common ground on this question.

Highlighting this question should not be mistaken as validation of the assessment that one stream in Chinese domestic and foreign policies is directed toward avenging its “Century of Humiliation.” Far from that. International recognition of territorial boundaries is a very serious matter. When a government takes measures to defend what are broadly agreed to be its legitimate territories, this is an act within the normal range of conduct, rather than a challenge to the values underpinning the conduct of international affairs. When a government either fails or refuses to peacefully settle a territorial boundary dispute, it is seen as a display of aggressive nationalism and, by logical extension, an act to rewrite international rules of interstate relations. It is, therefore, logical for *all* states to have a stake in observing the principle of territorial integrity of *any* state, and to share the goal of reaching peaceful resolution of border disputes.

Westerners have used the concept of *China proper* on the basis of early sinology, distinguishing what were seen as the core eighteen provinces of China, where Han Chinese prevailed, from other parts of the country, and as a subsequent theme in anthropology and history. For Chinese observers of Western diplomacy, however, differentiation of a *China proper* from the total landmass of the country smacks of a larger geostrategic agenda. Fueling such suspicions is the fact that missing in Western expressions about the kind of China it would like to see is the key word *united*. It has become standard for presidents of the United States to state that they welcome the rise of a China that is *prosperous, peaceful, and stable*.

Furthermore, viewed from Beijing, its basic paradigm of policy toward Taiwan has undergone a process of *de facto* retreat, from “liberation” (read: military invasion) from the 1950s to 1970s, to calling for “peaceful unification” in the 1990s, to accepting Taiwan as an equal member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the early 2000s, and since pursuing a wide range of pragmatic interactions across the Taiwan Strait (Chang and Chao 2009). The resultant bottom line is stability: so long as Taiwan does not declare *de jure* independence, Beijing can find ways to live with the status quo.

Although the Trump administration has not yet touched upon Xinjiang or Tibet in its China policy, those issues are almost certain

to arise again. The Chinese government is mindful of Western expressions of concern about developments in Xinjiang and Tibet. In the past two decades, Beijing has issued one white paper after another to offer its version of the social, economic, and human rights situations in those regions. Numerous missions including ethnic minority representatives have been sent to Western Europe and North America to present images of those landlocked regions. China can help allay foreign fears and speculation by simply allowing unfettered foreign access to those provinces. On the other hand, external great power support and mobilized diasporas do play a role in occasional clamors for independence among a few of the country's ethnic groups (Clarke 2017). As a result, the *de facto* standoff is likely to continue.

Regardless of the specific circumstances leading to the scare of Trump's apparently walking back on the One China arrangement, his act set a precedent. By the end of June 2017, Trump had approved the first arms package to Taiwan under his watch as president. The United States Senate Armed Services Committee voted to allow US warships to dock at Taiwan ports (Chow 2017). Such acts bring the United States one step further toward working to militarily keep China separate. Behind such developments lies the unspoken, but ideationally powerful, question in the United States about the proper geographical scope of China, which is likely to be with us for some time. However, so is Chinese determination to guard against domestic collusion with foreign actors toward independence or mass uprisings by any ethnic group anywhere within the country.

In short, the conceptual divide over the accepted geographical scope of Chinese governance is real and powerful. It will likely continue to put limits on the Chinese embrace of US notions of regional order.

North Korea

At the Trump-Xi meetup in Florida, North Korea emerged as a major topic. This was in many ways unexpected for the Chinese side, as the Korean peninsula ranked rather low on the list of issues candidate Trump had identified, especially in the context of

Trump's assessments of Chinese policy toward the United States. But there was no possibility of missing the message; the firing of missiles at an airbase in Syria at the dinner Trump hosted for Xi spoke louder than anything else. Whatever the view might be of the nascent presidency outside the United States, US policy preferences had to be taken seriously, or face consequences as demonstrated. Adding to the message on the occasion was the fact that the missile firing was not followed up with efforts like a US campaign for multilateral action against Syria at such forums as the United Nations, where a Chinese opinion would be a factor, at least in procedural terms.

When Trump called Xi within a week after the latter returned to Beijing, again over North Korea, it was yet another affirmation of the end of Obama-era strategic patience toward Pyongyang. But, viewed from Beijing, isn't Trump's impatience equally directed at Beijing? Is America's Korea policy establishment indeed so ignorant about the limits of Chinese influence over North Korean behavior? Some element of face-shaming has to be going on.

First, North Korea is not an issue area whereby the Obama administration failed to act, at least in terms of demonstrating US military strength and its resolve in protecting its allies and the United States itself. It was during the Obama years that deployment to South Korea of the US military's most powerful high altitude antimissile defense (THAAD) battery system was made an option.

THAAD was a controversial project from the start. Common sense would have it that North Korea would hardly need to fire a missile to do damage on the ground in South Korea, with the densely populated Seoul located within firing range of ordinary cannons. Furthermore, with the North Korean regime repeatedly threatening to turn Seoul into "a sea of fire" for decades, and with South Korea's going through a period of political and societal turmoil associated with the removal of a president from office, was THAAD an additional security guarantee or would it turn out to be yet another act of agitation against the North?

Second, when Xi went to Florida to meet Trump, he had already been shown to have a rather weak record in dealing with issues on the Korean peninsula. China had been opposed to the deployment of THAAD. In terms of bilateral diplomacy between

Beijing and Seoul, disagreement over THAAD was the single issue that managed to reverse the goodwill generated at the start of the Park Geun-hye administration in February 2013. President Park was the only head of state from an OECD country to attend the Chinese commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, which included a military parade in September 2015. The parade was an event the United States successfully lobbied virtually all of its key allies to boycott.

Third, to be fair, China has persistently failed to dispel the impression in the outside world that somehow it *either* wields a sufficient amount of influence over North Korean behavior *or* it qualifies to be viewed as an accomplice in disguise in the latter's pursuit of confrontation with the United States, South Korea, and Japan—the members comprising the standard Western conceptualization of “the international community” in Northeast Asia. That said, China's record in working with the Obama administration and other members of the P5+1 negotiations with Iran should help to dissuade international skepticism about its commitment over the North Korean matter, to whatever limited extent.

It is often forgotten that when the United States reached an arrangement with Pyongyang in 1994 for the latter to abandon its nuclear weapons program, China was not invited to participate, either in the diplomatic process or in the ensuing aid-for-freeze arrangement under the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO) program. The KEDO process stumbled for about ten years, with nothing either on the ground or in diplomatic achievements to show for it (Reiss 2002). It was only after January 2003 and Pyongyang's withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which marked the complete failure of the preceding efforts, that China was asked to be part of the multilateral effort to entice Pyongyang to change behavior.

By 2006, it was becoming clear that the Six-Party Talks that China had hosted since 2003 were falling far short of the declared goal of seeing the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear weapons program. The framework continued. Yet, synergy among the five (except North Korea) parties was too low for the off-and-on negotiation exercises to be of real interest to Pyongyang (Feng 2011). The unfortunate result

is that North Korea has continuously and unambiguously pursued a nuclear weapons program, including a missile delivery capacity that would eventually reach intercontinental ranges.

Trump has made his displeasure with China clear in the latest round of efforts at getting North Korea to heed the outside world's demand for a change in its behavior. In response, China has continued its practice of lodging verbal protests against US "secondary sanctions" on Chinese entities and individuals, while taking no substantive acts of retaliation. Aggregate stability in bilateral ties with the United States is at stake.

On July 3, 2017, North Korea successfully test-fired an intercontinental ballistic missile. Timed a day ahead of Independence Day in the United States and the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, a week later, this missile launch differed from ones in the past in that most experts estimate that it is capable of reaching Alaska (Erikson 2017). In response, President Trump again called on China to help rein in North Korea, in addition to launching a joint military exercise with South Korea. This is an all-too-familiar pattern of action and quite unlikely to deter North Korean action at all. If anything, the Chinese proposal of a "double freeze" also can fail to work, since Beijing is in no position to ensure Pyongyang upholds its end of the bargain. As such, the time has come for the United States to put pride aside and talk *with* North Korea, rather than continue the path of talking *about* it. For China, it is in its self-interest to effectively implement those multilateral sanctions against North Korea it agrees upon; failure to do so erodes its credibility in its own universe of diplomacy. Both China and the United States must resist the temptation to exploit the North Korean situation as a bargaining chip for gains on other fronts. Doing that will only serve to present a ready wedge for North Korea and other actors to drive Beijing and Washington further apart and agitate both.

Maritime Issues: East Asia in Disorder?

If there is one area where Trump's China policy has consistency with that of the Obama era, it is in the maritime domain. Like his

predecessor, Trump dutifully repeated that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are under the protection of the bilateral US-Japan treaty, standing shoulder to shoulder with the visiting Japanese prime minister at the White House. This contrasts clearly with the initial stir Trump caused over US commitment to NATO. The prime minister of Vietnam, another country with a history of conflict with China, was welcomed to the White House as well. There is a message of support behind the announcement of Trump's reciprocal trip, though in part coincidentally so due to Vietnam's rotating chairmanship of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. In dealing with the Philippines, whose president put on hold his country's maritime territorial dispute with China, there is no sign of wavering of US support for Manila. Last but not least, under Trump a so-called freedom of navigation operation was implemented in the South China Sea in May, lest it was too late to dispel worries at the annual Shangri-la Dialogue, which has solidified its role as the platform through which Washington can amplify its geostrategic agenda of pivoting to Asia. Within a week before Trump was going to meet Xi on the side of the G20 in Hamburg, a US Navy guided missile destroyer sailed within twelve nautical miles of an island China claims and controls in the South China Sea (Denyer and Gibbons-Neff 2017).

These and other synchronized acts of diplomacy between the United States and its allies and partners are informed by claims of East Asian regional order under duress. It is an excessively simplistic vision of the United States in decline and China on the rise and its corollary that the date is drawing near when countries must choose between Washington and Beijing as the ultimate guarantor. This feeds the fear that the postwar Pax Americana in Asia is crumbling and will inevitably be replaced by a fierce Darwinian power struggle between the United States and China. Overconfident Chinese commentators fall into jingoism. American observers leap to the conclusion that China is maneuvering to upset the US-led "hub and spoke" regional security arrangements and, by extension, the global order.¹ Even establishment of the multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is depicted as indication of a zero-sum competition, in spite of the broad convergence on the

need for additional sources of investment, which are conducive to generating growth in demand in the region's economies.

This idea of the United States on the decline deserves to be debunked. Talk of US decline is a long-standing American neurosis. Similar sentiments of weakness emerged in the early 1970s, after the Arab oil embargo, and again in the 1980s after Japan's phenomenal rise prompted fears of US economic eclipse. In both periods, there was no shortage of foreign jingoism in support of the argument that America's global position had peaked. But the United States proved far stronger than its internal or external critics imagined. The reemergence of US-decline rhetoric today is in fact a sign of American strength, which starts with brutal self-reflection.

It is beside the point whether the US relative position in the world today is stronger or weaker now than in the 1970s or 1980s. But it is important to remember that China has not caused the United States economic harm that is by any measure similar to what the OPEC states did in the 1970s. Quite the reverse: the history of two-way China-US trade and investment is one that both grew on the basis of an existent multilateral production network and strengthened it.

Serious political-economic study would agree that such a network has helped to underwrite the geostrategic tranquility that has prevailed across the Asia Pacific for the past four decades. Additionally, in the process, the US share of regional manufacturing grew, as did the efficiency of the sector, which contributed to an increase in Made-in-America products. Also in the process, mechanization and advances in technology did result in demand for an adjustment in knowledge and skills for a sector of the industrial workforce. Such is the process taking place in virtually all the economies around the world. As had been repeatedly noted, part of Trump's success in his election campaign was to link the pain of personal adjustment for working-class Americans to China, with the false promise of painless transition once import duties were imposed on made-/assembled-in-China products.

The reality is that the production chain weaving together the economies of China, the United States, and other Asia Pacific countries is very strong, and no economy can expect to flourish by diminishing participation in it. In recognition of this, China

proposed revitalization of economic growth in countries along the ancient Silk Road (Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe) and maritime trade routes from Southeast Asia to the Persian Gulf and North Africa. Finally, China's economic performance will have to continue to rely on unfettered access to the financial systems and consumer markets of the United States and its security allies as well.

As some Western observers suggest, the crux of the issue may be that China, unlike Japan in the 1980s, has failed to meet US expectations of evolving into a "like-minded" country. China's record in poverty reduction, both at home and abroad through aid and investment, means little to those who see Western-style political democracy as an absolute value. This judgment validates the fears of Chinese officials who see the United States as fundamentally committed to the overthrow of China's political order in order to remake its system in the American image. Many Chinese observers are puzzled by the US characterization of China as a military threat; by any objective measure, China is decades away from military parity and may never attain it. Chinese analysts also see US rhetoric and action as a strong factor behind the heightening of maritime sovereignty differences in the East and South China Seas in recent years, seeing a China determined to seek revenge for the past and dominance in the future, resulting in a self-perpetuating belief in inescapable enmity.

Security anxieties in the Asia Pacific do have legitimate causes, but the wise solution is not to stop at identifying the existence of distrust and/or the lack of trust. For China, there needs to be more appreciation of the positive role played by the United States in enabling its prosperity. China's forty years of sustained economic growth coincide with the history of a workable relationship with the United States. Chinese confidence in its governing system is justifiable, but wholesale rejection of foreign (including US) lessons and ideas for economic and political governance can only be a net loss for China. A United States that continues to be strong is in China's economic self-interest.

For its part, the United States must face the unpleasant truth that its capacity to reshape another country's system of governance is limited—especially with regard to China, a large and

complex society with deep-rooted and generally successful governance traditions. And American geostrategic thinkers should seriously consider that a stable and secure China is one that, in the long run, is more likely to accept the possibility of learning from the United States.

Conclusion

Viewed against some of the geopolitical and structural issues that have undergirded bilateral ties between China and the United States, particularly in the Asia Pacific region, there is more continuity than change in the Trump administration's handling of the US-China relationship. Chinese and US diplomats deserve praise for their efforts to arrange a face-to-face meeting between their leaders fairly early on. Momentum so generated rescued the relationship from a potential freefall to destruction, as no alternative rhetoric was available.

On high political issues like Taiwan, North Korea, and East Asia maritime space, it is not yet clear if a mutual learning process is under way. Ideally, the newly established dialogue mechanism, which simultaneously involves ministers of defense and foreign policy, should produce a vision for the next fifty years of relations between the two countries.

On trade and economic issues, the bottom line is that both governments have the WTO as the final outlet for resolving their differences, if only for the sake of convenience in domestic politics. The two governments remain some distance away from demonstrating joint leadership at multilateral forums, like APEC and the WTO. But if they make discernible progress on rule-based bilateral economic arrangements, including an investment treaty between them, it is likely to deliver real leadership at the market level in the region and beyond.

A little over half a year into his presidency, it is clear that Trump is continuing with the basic tenets of Obama-era US policy toward China, with perhaps the sole exception of loudly keeping China out of a US-led preferential trade arrangement with its allies. On its part, China has yet to find ways to effectively

address perceptions of a power shift in Asia in such a way as not to see itself frustrated because the United States seeks to prevent its loss of influence in the region. Can the two governments come up with the required wisdom to work out a conceptual mapping of their relationship for the next fifty years? Evidence thus far is not encouraging. But, it is worth reminding them that they should do precisely that.

Notes

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1. For a critical review of the spread of such views in the recent past, see Jerdén (2017).

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