Reality check

Donald Trump shies away from isolationism during his first meeting with the Chinese president

The highpoint of Chinese President Xi Jinping's global impact may have been his speech at the Davos Economic Forum on 17 January 2017. Amid the general chaos and nationalist sentiments unleashed by the strident rhetoric and erratic behaviour of the incoming US president, the Chinese leader came across as the adult in the room. At Davos, Xi presented himself as the world's foremost proponent of globalisation. He strongly criticised protectionist tendencies as manifested by President Trump and his entourage, asserting that "no-one can win a trade war."

Unsurprisingly, the two leaders' first meeting at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida on April 6-7 met with significant media frenzy. No-one doubted President Xi would conduct himself with dignity and professionalism. Ruthlessly efficient and well-informed, analysts predicted he would outsmart the impulsive and inexperienced Trump.

They were wrong. Trump dominated the discussion and put the Chinese on the backfoot through much of the two-day meeting. His conduct was respectful and gaffe-free. He hailed "tremendous progress" in US-China relations and called his burgeoning relationship with Xi "outstanding". Trump sounded suspiciously like a traditional American president. A new and still fragile sense of reality seems to have arrived at the White House.

Syrian airfield attack

The unprecedented 6 April bombing of a Syrian airbase by US forces – in response to an apparent chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government on its own civilians – overshadowed the meeting. Trump told Xi of the attack over dinner, shortly before the first tomahawk missiles struck. Xi mumbled in acknowledgement that chemical weapons had killed innocent children. In fact, the Chinese were furious at having to observe the deployment of American military might at such close quarters. China holds to a policy of non-intervention in other countries' internal affairs, which includes civil war. Further, Beijing is generally

supportive of Russia's pro-Assad position, as it fears further instability in Syria should Assad's government collapse or be removed.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson explained that the US missile attack was a one-off, and does not signal the beginning of greater US involvement in the Syrian civil war. Still, the bombing demonstrates Trump's willingness to take tough action, after he indicated Assad's chemical weapons attack had changed his stance on the Syria conflict. It also invites the question whether Trump may be prepared to use force against North Korea in order to prevent further development of nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Both Presidents agree that North Korea's nuclear development has "reached a very serious stage," though they part ways on how to deal with it. During the talks, Trump repeated that Washington is prepared to take unilateral action if China does not pressure North Korea into changing its ways. This could include a military strike on North Korea or, more likely, the re-introduction of nuclear weapons in South Korea. Trump has already ordered the aircraft carrier group USS Carl Vinson to sail towards the Korean peninsula.

Trade relations

Trump and Xi have agreed on a 100-day plan for trade talks to increase US exports to China, which would help chip away at the country's $347 billion trade deficit. Xi even claims he welcomes this development, since reducing the Chinese trade surplus would allow Beijing to better control its own inflation. To avert a trade war with the US, Xi offered to rescind the 2003 ban on US beef exports to China, and offered better market access for American financial investments, particularly securities and insurance.

The leaders agreed to advance Obama-era negotiations on a bilateral investment treaty (BIT) and to "explore the pragmatic cooperation in infrastructure, construction and energy." Trump also expressed interest in co-operating with China's far-reaching "One Road, One Belt" initiative. There are signs China will pay heed to Washington's calls for a lowering of its 25 per cent import tariff on foreign cars. In return, Beijing wants fewer restrictions on the purchase of US high-tech products and firms, such as Aixtron whose purchase by a Chinese company the US blocked in 2016.

Trump accepted the invitation to visit China in the foreseeable future and the two leaders agreed to establish a "U.S.-China Comprehensive Dialogue" consisting of four strands (diplomacy and security, economy,

law enforcement and cyber security). This new dialogue replaces Obama's "Strategic and Economic Dialogue" and is situated at presidential level. It is not dissimilar to the annual high-level German-Chinese Government Consultations.

The Florida summit does not appear to have focused on climate change, human rights or the South-China Sea dispute.

Back to reality

The US president is unlikely to ever shed his nationalistic and irascible leadership style. Yet, reality is beginning to dawn on the Trump White House. Trump's missile attack on a Syrian airbase demonstrates the new President is not an isolationist, balks at abhorrent human rights violations, and - despite his pronouncements to the contrary - is clearly prepared to exercise global US military leadership, at least on occasion. Trump realises the importance of establishing constructive relations with China, yet is not afraid to antagonise Russia, as he did with his attack on the Syrian airbase. Trump is beginning to realise that American self-interest still requires the country to engage globally.

It also requires professionalism at the top. The recent exclusion of right-wing ideologue Steve Bannon from the Principals Committee of the National Security Council and the extension of regular membership of this body to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the country's top intelligence directors is a step in the right direction. Trump's sacking of Deputy National Security Advisor K.T. McFarland, another right-wing firebrand, indicates his trust in the new, sober-minded National Security Adviser, General H.R. McMaster.

A degree of predictability is returning to the US government, along with a renewed interest in wider international engagement. America's European allies can breathe a collective sigh of relief. Let's just hope it's not premature.



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