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Behind the Trump-Xi Bromance

China has expertly handled the volatile U.S. president so far.

By **Shannon Tiezzi**

When Donald Trump won the U.S. presidency, analysts in both the United States and China were worried that the bilateral relationship between their countries was about to take a turn for the worst. China, after all, had been one of Trump's favorite scapegoats during the campaign, with China's rise functioning as a symbolic foil for what he saw as American weakness. A phone call with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen shortly after the election only

confirmed fears that the U.S.-China relationship was in for a sharp downturn.

Yet it didn't take long after Trump assumed office for observers to realize he was, in fact, adopting the opposite tactic toward China. Despite promises to get tough on trade, Trump's rhetoric toward U.S. allies like Japan and South Korea has been far harsher than his words for China. Even on North Korea Trump has vacillated between calling on China to do more and parroting Beijing's position that it has little control over Pyongyang. This contradictory position might best be summed up by a June 2017 tweet: "While I greatly appreciate the efforts of President Xi & China to help with North Korea, it has not worked out. At least I know China tried!"

What explains this about-face toward China? Based on some of Trump's comments, it seems there's a deceptively simple answer: a warm relationship between Trump and China's President Xi Jinping.

When asked about the potential for U.S.-China confrontation during his visit to Japan, for example, Trump downplayed the possibility for reasons largely tied to Xi personally. "As far as China is concerned, my relationship, as you know, with President Xi is also excellent," Trump proclaimed. "I like him a lot. I consider him a friend." He even made the claim that his views and Xi's were "pretty similar on trade" – something of a surprise considering how many times Trump has complained about the massive trade deficit the United States has with China.

Indeed, after infamously accusing China of "raping" the United States during his presidential campaign, Trump now seems more inclined to blame any trade imbalances on previous U.S. presidents, not Chinese policies. Before his meeting with Xi on November 9, Trump asserted that "the United States really has to change its policies because they've gotten so far behind on trade with

China... it's too bad that past administrations allowed it go get so far out of kilter.” In fact, he indicated that he had “great respect” for Xi for, in Trump’s mind, exploiting weak U.S. trade policies to China’s advantage. As Trump clarified later, during remarks to a group of U.S. and Chinese businessmen, “[W]ho can blame a country for being able to take advantage of another country for the benefit of its citizens? I give China great credit.” It was an extraordinary thing to do: praise a foreign leader for successfully bamboozling the United States.

Also odd was Trump’s over-the-top praise of a military parade China arranged in his honor. He called the parade “magnificent” and added “the world was watching... They were all watching. Nothing you can see is so beautiful.” In gushing about the Chinese military display, Trump seems to have forgotten that China is seen as the United States’ main competitor when it comes to military technology and might. Perhaps at heart Trump doesn’t envision China as a potential security concern for the United States – speaking at the business gathering in China, he indicated that he and Xi are “very, very much on the same plane when it comes to security.”

Trump may believe that he and Xi are friends, but any relationship they have is, on Xi’s part, a calculated endeavor to extract desired behavior from the United States. In his book *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China*, James Mann sees a pattern in China’s approach to the United States: “Chinese leaders preferred to deal with a single, high-level American official who could be courted, flattered, and praised for his wisdom.” In the past, that role was filled by close presidential advisers like Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski; today, Mann sees history repeating with the president himself.

Writing for *The Daily Beast* ahead of Trump’s visit to China, Mann explained: “Trump has a huge ego. The

Chinese love big egos. Flattery is a skill Chinese officials have perfected over the millennia... Trump doesn't like abstract rules; he sees the world in personalized, transactional terms. And so, too, does China.”

That flattery has apparently paid off. Less than a year into his presidency, Trump talks of Xi (and, largely, of China) in mostly glowing terms. Trump called Xi “a very special man” during his joint press statement with the Chinese president; he has repeatedly called Xi a friend. Trump has even taken to repeating Xi's talking points as if they were the gospel truth. In an April interview, Trump told the *Wall Street Journal* that he had changed his mind on China's role in the North Korea crisis after “10 minutes” of conversation with Xi: “I felt pretty strongly that they had a tremendous power [over] North Korea. ... But it's not what you would think.” In the same conversation, he also claimed that “Korea actually used to be a part of China” – which is both untrue and something the more nationalistic Chinese histories have been known to claim.

For the moment, then, we're seeing a Trump-Xi bromance well beyond the scope of previous U.S.-China top-level ties. But what happens when it becomes apparent that China is not actually willing to change past practices to suit Trump's convenience?

Trump wants “a fair and reciprocal” trade relationship, for example, but the main stumbling block to that end is China's policy of anointing and protecting domestic champions in critical industries. That's not likely to change. Trump acknowledged “China's market access restrictions and technology transfer requirements” in his joint press statement alongside Xi, but immediately segued into very Trumpian praise of “the tremendous, incredible, job-producing agreements” signed during his visit. This suggests that Trump can be easily distracted from core, long-term issues by short-term gains – meaning China can continue to restrict U.S. market

access in industries from entertainment to information technology as long as it occasionally offers mega-deals in exchange. That's standard practice on China's part already.

North Korea is a trickier example. China has a long-standing history of watering down attempts to sanction Pyongyang lest economic coercion spark regime collapse. Trump, like previous presidents, is hoping to change that calculus. "We must act fast, and hopefully China will act faster and more effectively on this problem than anyone," Trump proclaimed at the business gathering in Beijing. However, we haven't seen any indications that the Trump administration has a new plan to extract Chinese cooperation. Meanwhile, China itself has shown no signs of budging from its oft-stated preference for engaging North Korea through dialogue – something Trump has previously described as a waste of time.

Based on Trump's attitude toward the North Korea issue, it seems his willingness to forgive China's foot-dragging is directly proportional to how recently he has talked with Chinese officials. That fits with a broader pattern that dates back to Trump's habits as a businessman.

According to an analysis by the *Washington Post*, based on interviews with Trump's former employees, he tends to adopt the position of the last person he spoke with, especially if that person is skilled at playing to Trump's vanity. Xi Jinping certainly is, as we saw during Trump's "state visit-plus" in November. Eventually, as time and distance set in, Trump will likely drift back to less-sanguine view of China – but a phone call from his buddy in Beijing may be all it takes to make him change course yet again.

The Author

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