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China-US ties: A roller-coaster ride



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A chuffed Beijing eyed unimpeded sway over territories it disputed with Southeast Asian nations.



📷 US President Donald Trump. (Photo: AP)

When Donald Trump won the American presidential election in 2016, China uncorked the champagne and let off high-fives. Policymakers and strategists in Beijing were elated that an eccentric man who repudiated the US' customary great power role in the world and who had no beef with authoritarian regimes was going to enter the White House.

Six months down the road, though, there have been so many zigzags in relations between the two most powerful nations that China would be scratching its head. The temperamental and strategy-shy Trump has blown hot and cold with such rapidity that it is almost as though his mood towards China on a given day depends on which side of the bed he wakes up.

After initially taunting and rattling China through a protocol-burning chat with the President of Taiwan, Mr Trump cooled down and publicly stated that his administration would continue to respect the "One China" principle of recognising only the mainland. China interpreted it as a sign that the iconoclastic Trump in election campaign mode was settling down and would become accommodative as a President.

Adding to China's delight was Mr Trump's decision to abandon the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade bloc that his predecessor Barack Obama had stitched together as a bulwark against China dictating global economic engagement. By tossing aside TPP to pacify his anti-trade domestic American voter base, Mr Trump confirmed Beijing's impression that he was an inward-looking American politician with no vision to push back China's expanding economic footprint.

Then, as the North Korean ruler Kim Jong-un launched a spree of missiles and warned of fresh nuclear tests, Mr Trump bent over backwards to appease China. The linkage he drew between winning Chinese pressure to check Pyongyang and softening up on China's predatory trade policies was appreciated by Beijing. It revealed desperation on Mr Trump's part to respond to the North Korean challenge at any cost, including dropping his vow of punishing China for being a currency manipulator and holding off on imposing tariff barriers on Chinese exports. To sweeten the deal further, Mr Trump eased the pressure of the US Navy on the Chinese Navy's bullying activities in the South China Sea. A chuffed Beijing eyed unimpeded sway over territories it disputed with Southeast Asian nations.

With each ballistic missile that the jingoistic Kim released in North Korea, Mr Trump appeared to be relaxing lever after lever in the US' foreign policy towards China. But the ferocious Kim knew better than to cave in. He flagrantly defied and disregarded China's admonitions and kept blasting away with his rockets. His calculation that Beijing, however annoyed, could not afford to totally turn off the tap to choke Pyongyang due to the former's fear of a regime collapse in the latter and

American encroachment up to the Chinese border proved to be a smarter bet than Mr Trump's wishful logic of a cooperative China.

So, even as Mr Trump kept up his saccharine tweets about Chinese President Xi Jinping being a "great leader" and a "terrific guy", he began lamenting that "my friend" was not doing what he had hoped for to pin down North Korea. China's trade with North Korea rose by 10 per cent in the first half of 2017 and Beijing was using every new North Korean missile provocation to push for a halt to military exercises that the US holds with its alliance partners South Korea and Japan. Instead of soaking the pressure of the North Korean crisis on behalf of the US, China was putting the ball back in the American court.

The underlying structural dynamic had not changed at all. Unlike the US and its allies in Asia, China does not view North Korea's nukes as a national security threat. Rather, for Beijing, the stationing of American anti-missile systems in South Korea and US warnings of unilateral military action against North Korea are mortal threats.

Mr Trump's "art of the deal" try was oblivious to the basic historic conflict of interests between the US and China that has existed since 1991. After the fall of the Soviet Union, only one major power was capable of equalling and surpassing the economic and military power of the US, i.e. China.

Slowing and coaxing China's ascendance to prevent it from becoming a hegemon in Asia and beyond was and is the US' natural position for the last 25 years. If Washington shuns this maxim, as Mr Trump occasionally has done with his short-term tactical U-turns, it is setting itself up to be overtaken by China in material power and global influence. Little wonder then that after Mr Trump's adventure to win over China failed to yield concrete gains, his administration is now reverting to aspects of the traditional US posture of keeping China restrained. Following a fiery comprehensive economic dialogue between the two sides last week, tariffs on Chinese exports that Mr Trump held back as a carrot are likely to be slapped.

Reports that the US President has authorised the American Navy to prowl the South China Sea with fewer restrictions and political permissions than in the Obama era signify that China-US relations can head back to the zone of confrontation, containment and shadowboxing.

But hold on! Just because Mr Trump is now hardening his line on China does not mean that countries which have disputes with Beijing can start counting on Washington's steady support. The American exhortation for India and China to engage in "direct dialogue free of any coercive aspects" over the Doklam standoff is an unmistakable criticism of Beijing's behaviour towards New Delhi. However, if push comes to shove in the Himalayas, India is realistic to know that Washington is not going to risk its complex ties with Beijing to come and fight alongside New Delhi.

The most that India, Japan and Vietnam can expect from the tempestuous Trump administration are phases when it will pressure China and spells when it will make nice with China. In the absence of a Trump doctrine that clearly identifies and paints China as a specific type of actor, the time for concerned Asian powers to come up with a joint doctrine of their own to mitigate China's aggression is right now.

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