



Comrade Xi Meets Mister Trump: Summit or Base Camp?

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Xi Jinping's first encounter with Donald Trump, though eclipsed by the U.S. cruise missile attack on Syria, was reckoned a success by both the Chinese and U.S. administrations. Each side took the measure of the other, personal relationships began to form, and well-known policy positions were authoritatively aired, all in a "positive atmosphere," both sides said. Last week's meetings built a base on which future, undoubtedly tougher, exchanges will take place.

While Chinese officials touted a "new structure for high-level cooperation" as the summit's major result, U.S. officials stressed a "100-day" countdown to sorting out the thorniest bilateral trade issues. That three-month window gives the Trump administration time to develop its China policies and field its team. Business people and other China watchers who had expected specific actions at Mar-a-Lago on trade and market access will have to bide their time. Human rights advocates likewise must be more patient, perhaps indefinitely so, as their concerns appear not to have been addressed.

Modest Expectations Modestly Met

Ahead of President Xi's first meeting with President Trump, U.S. officials' press briefings aimed to lower

expectations for any substantive results, let alone dramatic decisions, on the vipers' tangle that now defines the U.S. relationship with China: trade and financial imbalances, market access, intellectual property theft, North Korea's nuclear threats, China's military provocations along Pacific maritime boundaries, and myriad other issues. These initial sessions were meant as get-acquainted occasions, the White House stressed, as much for Trump and Xi as for their senior officials.

The Chinese press likewise set a low bar. In contrast to the pre-meeting cacophony from the American commentariat, the Chinese media stayed virtually silent on the Xi-Trump encounter. This was because Xi and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership did not know what to expect from a U.S. president unlike any they had ever met and, hence, could not issue their usual directives to the domestic press. On the eve of Xi's departure from Beijing, the party's beacon, the *People's Daily*, offered only the anodyne comment that the Xi-Trump meetings would be "a major foreign

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policy event of global significance.” (This pabulum was bylined “Zhong Sheng,” an authoritative moniker that signals the party leadership’s views.)

For the Trump administration, whose China policies, like the team that will craft and carry them out, remain in their formative phase, the Mar-a-Lago feel-good placeholder was a fine outcome. The administration was not boxed into the maddening exercise of producing a joint communiqué with the Chinese, although Ambassador Cui Tiankai had pushed hard for one, even helpfully giving a draft to the first son-in-law. President Trump and his cabinet officers were able to take the measure not only of Xi but also of the senior figures in his entourage: Wang Huning, the Politburo *eminence grise* who has served now three general secretaries; Li Zhanshu, the Xi loyalist who runs the party machinery; Wang Yang, the vice premier, who is nominally charged with foreign economic affairs but unlikely to rise further in the party hierarchy; Yang Jiechi, the state counselor who acts as Xi’s senior foreign policy adviser and who has been dealing with Americans since 1974. These men will be among the administration’s major counterparties in the many stressful sessions that lie ahead. Last week’s meetings also saw the quartet of U.S. cabinet officers who will face the Chinese—Secretaries Rex Tillerson, Steven Mnuchin, James Mattis, and Wilbur Ross—and the national security adviser H.R. McMaster bond as they mastered their briefs. That these experienced officials are taking charge of the Sino-American agenda must be a relief to the Chinese who have been as baffled as many Americans by unclear lines of authority in the Trump White House and gossip of personality clashes.

But if Xi and his entourage were reassured by Trump’s senior advisers, they left Mar-a-Lago as perplexed as ever by the president himself. Warmly hospitable and engaged with his guests as he was, outside the dining room the president took the precipitate, in the Chinese mind, decision to launch cruise missiles on a Syrian airbase. Such sudden, seemingly instinctual, decisions are not in the Chinese diplomatic playbook; rather, long-term policy goals and the incremental steps needed to reach those are

agreed to by the party leadership and systematically implemented. To be sure, Chinese leaders give themselves tactical leeway, but they follow their map and stick to their path. They deeply dislike surprises and reckon poorly with improvisation.

What the Chinese People Were Told... and Not Told

Throughout Xi’s Florida sojourn, China Central Television (CCTV) served up good visuals for Chinese viewers—lots of smiles and friendly handshakes, sumptuous surroundings, the cute touch of Trump’s granddaughter, already a social media star in China, singing a Chinese song and reciting Chinese verse for Xi. The video messages to its huge audience—400 million Chinese take the CCTV nightly news as their main source of information—were that Xi represents China with strength and dignity, and the U.S. president treats him with respect, friendship, and generous hospitality.

More substantial statements came from the CCP’s Xinhua News Agency and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Wang extolled as the Mar-a-Lago meetings’ major result the establishment of a “new structure for high-level dialogue,” four discrete discussion groups in total, each apparently to be led on the Chinese side by a Politburo member. In the Xinhua statement attributed to him, Xi called these conversations a “big cake of cooperation.” Able bakers having baked remarkably fast, two of the four “dialogues” were conveniently conducted at Mar-a-Lago: one on foreign affairs and security, the other on economics, finance, and trade. This is old wine in relabeled bottles, as cabinet-level “strategic” and “economic” dialogues have for more than a decade been annual rituals in U.S.-China relations; and they have not aged well. The utility of such high-level dialogues depends, of course, on who is talking with whom. With few exceptions, such as then treasury secretary Henry Paulson speaking with then vice premier Wang Qishan, previous dialogues have yielded little of substance while consuming light

years of bureaucratic time in dead-end paper chases. U.S. officialdom has lost its taste for such Sino-chatter and will not be investing much in this latest version.

Of the other two dialogues agreed to at Mar-a-Lago, that on “society and culture” promises nothing but nougat and meringue. The fourth dialogue also looks problematic and potentially nasty: high-level discussions on transnational crime and cybersecurity. Cooperating on transnational crime, as Wang Yi’s statement made clear, means Chinese leaders trying to persuade U.S. authorities to help them track down and deport to China not only “fugitives” wanted by the Chinese judicial system but also those sought by the CCP’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, its extrajudicial “anticorruption” vigilantes. Under various diplomatic agreements, the United States and China already “cooperate” in several law-enforcement efforts—narcotics, for example—but China has not always been cooperative in these endeavors, especially when political considerations override policing. Moreover, the United States is not about to allow the party’s internal cops to nab Xi’s erstwhile cadre opponents who have gone to ground in the United States but not broken U.S. law. As for cybersecurity, it is a Chinese euphemism for Internet controls, on which U.S. policies diametrically oppose Chinese practice.

Other than promoting this new structure of high-level dialogues, the Chinese statements depicted Xi as briefing Trump on “supply-side reforms” to the domestic economy—code for yet another attempt by the central government to reduce industrial capacity whose output China often exports—and presenting China’s “principled positions” on regional and global issues. These recitals are standard operating procedure for Chinese leaders’ meetings with their foreign counterparts, as are platitudes on the importance of the relevant bilateral relationship. In this vein, Xi observed at Mar-a-Lago that “when Sino-American relations are good, it’s good for our peoples and good for the world.” He added that “we must constructively resolve differences” and “appropriately deal with sensitive questions.” Wang Yi listed some of these “sensitive questions” in his statement: Taiwan, Tibet

(presumably laying down a marker on contacts with the “splittist” Dalai Lama), the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) on the Korean Peninsula, and observance of a one-China policy (not “principle,” as the Chinese usually label this sacred touchstone of Sino-American relations).

Last, the Chinese statements had President Trump accepting Xi’s invitation to pay a “state visit to China within this year.” U.S. spokespersons confirmed plans for a visit but waffled on the timing. On Xi’s 2017 calendar, the 19th Party Congress, likely to convene in late autumn, is the year’s crucial event, and he will see a presidential state visit through that lens, either to gild his credentials ahead of the Party Congress or to bask in his greater glory afterward.

U.S. Policy Implications

In the Xinhua statement, President Trump got little ink—the statement was Xi’s platform after all—but U.S. cabinet officials convened the media to put an American spin on the meetings. Secretary Tillerson led by stressing Trump’s advocacy for American workers who have been affected by Chinese trade policies and reiterating the president’s demands for improved market access for U.S. goods exported to China as well as fairer treatment for U.S. firms operating in the country. Secretary Ross picked up those themes to note that Chinese officials had agreed to a U.S. proposal for a 100-day joint review of trade frictions—a deadline, Ross said, that signaled a “sea change in the pace of discussions.” There may or may not be a quickened pace in trade negotiations over the next three months, but the window gives the Trump administration time to formulate its overall China policies and to field a team to implement them.

If the U.S. business community and other China watchers will have to bide their time awaiting substantive results from this 100-day review, human rights advocates—including key Republican senators—may need Job-like patience before the Trump administration addresses their concerns with China.

When asked whether Chinese human rights violations were discussed at Mar-a-Lago, Secretary Tillerson waltzed away from a direct answer with this casuistic denial: “America’s values are quite clear and they really occupied a core of all our discussions. I don’t think you have to have a separate conversation, somehow separate our core values around human rights from our economic discussions, our military-to-military discussions, or our foreign policy discussions.”

As to what can realistically be accomplished in the way of trade talks as the clock is counting down the 100 days, Secretary Ross has conceded that this is “a very, very short time.” ∞

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