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How Trump should prepare for Xi

Doug Bandow

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If there's a moment that should give Americans pause, it is Donald Trump, international ingenué, meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping, son of a Mao Zedong confidante and victim of the Cultural Revolution, who climbed atop the world's biggest political heap. Xi also knows as much about Middle America as does the U.S. president, having once spent time with a typical Midwestern family.

Trump is not a man who devotes much time to preparing. But much depends on him learning about both China and Xi, particularly what motivates them. The most important bilateral relationship in the world is that between the United States of America and China.

The starting point should be to hire a few people to staff the State Department and other agencies. No secretary of state, no matter how talented and knowledgeable, can manage U.S. foreign policy alone.

Washington needs a strategy to deal with Asia's rising power. Priorities must be set, trade-offs need to be evaluated, deals should be offered. Appropriate means must be developed to advance serious ends.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson isn't going to draft the relevant memos. Trump certainly won't do so. Someone who knows something about China and Asia needs to bridge the gap between state's permanent employees and the secretary.

If the administration won't be ready, it should postpone the summit. Beijing will have an agenda and a strategy to advance its interests. So must Trump & Co.

First, the administration must recognize that it can't "win" on every issue. What is most important to the president? Limiting Chinese exports, defenestrating North Korea's Kim Jong Un, deterring Beijing's truculent maritime practices, or something else? Treating everything as essential means none of them are.

Second, confrontation and military threats are likely to end badly. The U.S. armed forces are far more powerful than the People's Liberation Army, but China has far more at stake in its neighborhood and therefore is willing to spend and risk far more to protect its interests. Moreover, Xi and the rest of China's leadership direct a rising, nationalistic power not inclined to be bullied. Washington can and should communicate its willingness to back vital interests with force, but do so, yes, "diplomatically."

Third, the president needs to learn the art of diplomacy, and quickly. China might moderate how it pursues its territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific, but will require something in return. Beijing is irritated with Pyongyang's behavior, but to be convinced to apply greater pressure requires the U.S. to address China's interests and concerns.

Fourth, Trump should separate the interests of the U.S. and its allies, as well as distinguish between essential and peripheral concerns. Allies should be a means to an end, the defense of the U.S. Washington shouldn't protect other nations as an act of charity, especially against a nuclear-armed power. Moreover, America's principle interest in, say, Japan and the Philippines is preserving their independence, not their control of unimportant and contested islets.

Fifth, the president should adapt U.S. policy in expectation that friendly states will do far more on behalf of their own interests. If the Philippines wants to go ship-to-ship with China, it needs an effective navy, rather than relying on America's fleet. Japan needs to be willing to employ the navy that it has. Changed circumstances warrant changed policies.

Sixth, the president should recognize that cheap imports are as much a benefit as are expensive exports. Average folks, at least those not living on New York City's Fifth Avenue, benefit from a lower cost of living. Exporters also do better when they purchase intermediate goods for less. And unless the Chinese unexpectedly start burning the dollars they collect for their exports, the money will come back to the U.S. as purchases or investments.

Seventh, it is vital to develop a generally civil and cooperative U.S.-China relationship. Differences are inevitable but conflict is not.

Beijing does not threaten the U.S. — the latter's territory, population, wealth, or liberty. Rather, China is contesting American dominance along China's border. That may be advantageous for the U.S., but is hardly a vital concern worth war.

The first meeting of the presidents from the world's two most important nations is a major diplomatic moment. Trump needs to become something he's never been, a knowledgeable statesman.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and served as a special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Policy in a Changed World" and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea." He frequently writes about military non-interventionism.