

Can U.S.–China Relations Survive President Donald Trump?

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Can the U.S.-China relationship be saved? Not if President Donald Trump has his way. He recently lashed out wildly at Beijing. The American president acts impulsively, his emotions fluctuating madly, and out of ignorance, his beliefs reflecting a most superficial understanding of the underlying issues. His shortcomings bode ill for maintaining a functioning bilateral relationship between the world's two most important nations.

When running for office the president took a hostile position toward the People's Republic of China. He threatened to impose a 45 percent tariff on goods from the PRC and insisted that Beijing could shut down the North Korean nuclear program with the snap of President Xi Jinping's fingers. Before taking office the American chief executive seemed ready to raise Taiwan's status, to China's profound consternation.

However, at the Mar-a-Lago summit in April, President Trump did an almost complete flip-flop. He muted his trade criticism, said China's President Xi had explained how difficult it was to deal with North Korea, and expressed warm feelings for his Chinese counterpart. The U.S. also said it would honor the "One China" perspective that long characterized U.S. policy.

A couple months later President Trump said he was disappointed in the result of Beijing's efforts to control the North but thanked the PRC for trying. Then at the end of July he issued one of his by now stereotypical rants in two connected tweets: "I am very disappointed in China. Our foolish past leaders have allowed them to make hundreds of billions of dollars a year in trade, yet they do NOTHING for us with North Korea, just talk. We will no longer allow this to continue. China could easily solve this problem!"

There is much to criticize about Chinese policy—and not just regarding North Korea. The mistreatment of Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo is particularly disturbing. But in his brief comment the president demonstrated more than even his usual quota of ignorance. Indeed, not one statement was true.

First, Chinese people and companies, not "China," make hundreds of billions of dollars from trade, and not because the U.S. government gave its permission but because American people

and companies purchase Chinese products. These low-priced imports are of enormous benefit to people in this country, worth, yes, “hundreds of billions of dollars a year.” Trade is called trade because it involves, well, trade. Such voluntary exchange usually is between people and firms, not governments, and occurs because it is mutually beneficial. The chief victims of any interference by the U.S. government would be the American people, who would be denied access to the goods (and today even services) which they demand.

Second, China has no easy solution to the “North Korea Problem.” The two countries are more frenemies than allies. Pyongyang long has rejected Chinese “advice” and fears a sell-out by Beijing. Even if the PRC was willing to cut off all food and energy to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the North might well continue to pursue nuclear weapons, irrespective of the cost to its population. During the late 1990s a half million or more people died due to famine, but the DPRK government refused to change course. Yet the Kim dynasty survived. And now is developing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles.

Third, Beijing has not done “NOTHING.” The PRC apparently has halted coal purchases, for instance. Gasoline prices have increased in Pyongyang, presumably because of reduced supplies.

What China has not done is what President Trump apparently expected, a dramatic, immediate, and complete economic embargo. A real estate mogul running his personal company might instantaneously flip flop on an important issue with little objection from those he hired to work for him. Even a strong figure like President Xi Jinping could not so easily abandon years, even decades, of Chinese government policy in an instant, one in which both the People’s Liberation Army and Chinese Communist Party have a special interest. Imagine a Chinese demand that the U.S. withdraw its troops from South Korea, and do so in, oh, the next couple of months.

Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that President Trump obviously does not imagine that the PRC has any legitimate reason to refuse to implement his will. What could possibly motivate China to do NOTHING for Washington on this issue?

North Korea is a matter of security for Beijing. China does not want squeeze the DPRK so hard that it collapses, spewing refugees and possibly conflict northward across the border. A failed state would be bad news for a country separated by a modest river rather than a vast ocean.

Moreover, Beijing does not see America as a friendly actor in the region. Washington is attempting to contain the PRC, irrespective of U.S. rhetoric to the contrary. So China is not inclined to enable Korean reunification, which would result in a more powerful and active Korean nation, allied with America, and hosting U.S. troops, perhaps on the Yalu. Which the PRC went to war in 1950 to prevent. In effect, Washington is demanding that Beijing help contain itself.

This doesn’t mean there might not be a deal to strike. For instance, President Trump could suggest that China stop supporting the DPRK if the U.S. stops basing forces in Korea. But Washington must negotiate, not dictate. The president must realize that even America is not all-powerful, able to simply instruct lesser nations to fulfill his latest schemes.

Irrespective of who occupies the White House, the U.S.-China relationship is going to be difficult. Historically incumbent and rising powers often clash, the so-called Thucydides Trap. In the late 1800s Great Britain accommodated America but confronted Germany, with dramatically different results.

However, if U.S. policy is determined by passion, ignorance, and myopia, the prospects of maintaining a peaceful relationship are far lower. President Trump is not a stupid man, but until he seeks to educate himself he risks acting stupidly. Then the cost for both nations, and most of Asia, could be quite high.

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