



What to expect from highly-anticipated Trump-Xi meeting

Christine Guluzian

April 5, 2017

The highly-anticipated first meeting between President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping, the leaders of the world's two largest economies, is taking place in Mar-a-Lago in Florida on Thursday and Friday.

Economic and security issues will be the main focus of discussions. Economic issues will likely center on U.S.-China trade relations, while security issues are sure to be focused on North Korea's unconventional weapons program.

On trade, President Trump has already made numerous statements regarding his goal of “reshaping” U.S. trade policy. Last week, Trump tweeted that his upcoming meeting with Xi will be a “very difficult one” because of “massive trade deficits.” On Friday, Trump signed two executive orders aimed at addressing the causes of U.S. trade deficits.

While taking care not to mention any countries by name, the first of the orders mandates officials to “produce a country-by-country, product-by-product report in 90 days that will serve as the basis of future decisionmaking by the administration on trade-related issues.” Hence, the topic of trade will most certainly be high on the agenda of the Xi-Trump meeting.

The other important topic likely to be discussed will be North Korea's increased belligerence, as demonstrated through its recent spate of ballistic missile tests. President Trump might press President Xi to implement further economic sanctions against North Korea, even though China recently decided to halt imports of coking coal from North Korea until the end of 2017 — the country's number one export that makes up some 35 percent of its economy.

Ideally, Trump and Xi would discuss cooperative measures to discourage Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs from advancing.

Placed into a larger context, the fact that the first meeting between President Trump and President Xi is taking place in Mar-a-Lago in Florida and not in the White House is significant for two reasons.

First, it was unclear for some time when or where the first meeting between the two leaders would take place. Some experts believed the G20 Summit in Hamburg Germany in July would have provided the earliest opportunity.

The fact that it is now taking place several months earlier than expected, and at Trump's estate in Florida, indicates that even greater importance is being placed on the meeting and that the topics to be covered are exponentially more urgent than initially thought to be.

Second, this will likely be a relatively casual meeting, more akin to a summit than a formal state visit. This should provide a more informal environment in which the two leaders can establish an initial relationship, critical for U.S.-China relations. It may also provide more opportunities to discuss these core economic and security issues, though it would be unrealistic to expect a single diplomatic meeting to resolve them.

The more casual environment of the Xi-Trump meeting is reminiscent of the "shirt-sleeves summit" between President Obama and President Xi in 2013 at the Sunnylands estate in California, where the two leaders apparently got acquainted over long walks and leisurely dinners.

A key difference is that President Obama was a much more experienced president at the time, while Trump is not yet 100 days into his presidency. If Trump's inexperience and unconventional "negotiating tactics" come at the cost of U.S.-China relations, it could, in turn, stymie efforts to contain Pyongyang's unconventional weapons program.

Trump has already been testing China's patience through a number of incendiary tactics during, and even prior to, his presidency. Trump has called China a currency manipulator, threatened to impose a 45-percent tariff on Chinese imports, and even questioned — though later reaffirmed — the four decade-old "One China" policy. Through it all, Beijing has not taken the bait or overreacted to Trump's provocations.

President Obama called relations between China and the U.S. "the most important bilateral relationship" of the 21st century. And rightly so. Were U.S.-China relations to descend into conflict of any type — be it a trade war or military engagement — the security of both states would suffer, along with that of their regional partners. It would have profound global implications.

This meeting could present a good opportunity for both leaders to discuss these core economic and security issues on trade and North Korea before they further strain U.S.-China relations.

Rather than attempt to drive a counterproductive wedge between the two countries through harsh rhetoric, the Xi-Trump meeting should be taken up as a good opportunity to start building a “constructive partnership” between the United States and China.

With North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-Un testing yet another missile on Wednesday in advance of the meeting, doing so would be elemental for addressing mutual security and economic concerns into the future.

But perhaps that’s asking for too much from this unconventional president. Just coming out of this meeting with U.S.-China relations still intact and unscathed would be a good start.

Christine Guluzian is a post-doctoral visiting research fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute.