

Trump's strategy benefiting China

Written by Sushil Seth

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Was there really a grand strategy behind US President Donald Trump's 12-day Asia tour? It does not look like there was one, and none seemed to unfold as Trump moved from one country to another on his itinerary.

North Korea appears to have hogged much of Trump's attention since he came to power. He cannot believe that despite all his threats to annihilate the "Little Rocket Man," his regime and his country, Kim Jong-un remains unbowed.

The US has sent three aircraft carrier groups toward North Korean waters for naval exercises, which Kim would regard as an existential threat.

In a speech to the South Korean National Assembly, but aimed at Kim, Trump said: "The weapons you're acquiring are not making you safer; they are putting your regime in grave danger. Every step you take down this dark path increases the peril you face."

Against this backdrop, he reportedly told Kim come to the table to "make a deal."

The question is: what sort of a deal?

Short of renouncing nuclear weapons, there is no deal.

"We will offer a path to a much better future. It begins with an end of the aggression of your regime, a stop to the development of your ballistic missiles, and complete, verifiable and total denuclearization," Trump said.

There is no indication that Pyongyang is inclined to come to the table for such a deal. As Russian President Vladimir Putin has reportedly said, North Korea would rather eat grass than abandon its nuclear weapons.

However, Trump believes that China can deliver the goods here if it were to cut off all economic ties with North Korea, with no money for its nuclear weapons program and for almost anything else. That will mean two things.

First, Kim's regime would collapse, creating chaos and a flood of refugees streaming into China.

Second, a state of non-governance would create, over time, prospects of unification with South Korea, thus creating conditions for US military presence near China's border by virtue of Seoul's security alliance with Washington.

Beijing is not prepared to go that far, though it has lately tightened its sanctions against the North under the UN Security Council resolutions.

That has encouraged Trump that a combination of flattery and in the larger context of US-China relations, Beijing might be prepared to go the extra mile to tell Kim that he has run out of options and his nuclear threat, though catastrophic if it were to materialize, will also be self destructive.

During his China visit, Trump described his official meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) as "excellent ... discussing North Korea — and I do believe there is a solution to that — as you [Xi] do," but it was left ambiguous what the solution might be. Trump nonetheless thanked China for cutting all banking ties with the rogue regime.

In a larger context, Trump is offering China a shared role with the US to manage world affairs. Until Trump became president, this was something the US was not prepared to confer on China. China was at best a regional leader and even there its role was not unfettered.

The US was insisting on freedom of navigation through South China Sea, but now Trump says his "great chemistry" with Xi would lead two men to solving "world problems of great danger."

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For added emphasis, Trump said: “ I believe we can solve almost of them [problems] and probably all of them.”

As for China's currency manipulation and its burgeoning surpluses with the US, he generously absolved Beijing of any blame, saying it was doing what any nation would do, which is to maximize its advantage, made possible by the incompetence of the past US administrations.

Talking of the “shocking” China trade imbalance, Trump said: “It is too bad that past administrations have allowed it to get so far out of kilter, but we will make it fair and it will be tremendous for both of us.”

Apparently, as a start, about US\$250 billion worth of memorandum were signed with Chinese companies, which do not translate into actual contracts.

At the same time, Trump has virtually gone quiet on the issue of South China Sea islands, which China has claimed as its own and built military structures on them to defend its sovereignty, even though this sovereignty is contested by other countries in the region.

However, most are now accommodating China, with its growing economic, military and political power, as they see the US' power waning. China could not have hoped for a better president in Trump from the viewpoint of maximizing its regional and global role.

Even though Trump has talked up his “great chemistry” with Xi, nothing substantial has moved on any of the issues that have plagued US-China relationship, be it the question of South China Sea or the massive trade imbalance in China's favor.

In the larger global context, as former US deputy secretary of state Antony Blinken wrote in the New York Times: “If the Trump-led retreat into nationalism, protectionism, unilateralism and xenophobia continues, China's model could carry the day.”

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