

China's plans to bloody US' nose

Written by Joseph Bosco
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China is likely planning to give the US a “bloody nose” in Asia — economically and militarily.

This would be a turnabout of the tactic Washington openly considered in late 2017: launching a limited military strike to give the regime of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un a taste of the consequences it would suffer if it persisted in its nuclear and missile testing and threats.

Aside from the kinetic component of the “maximum pressure” campaign of US President Donald Trump’s administration, the other two elements were economic sanctions, and moral and political delegitimization of Pyongyang’s rule over the North Korean people.

The combination worked to get Kim’s attention and initially put him on the theoretical path to denuclearization — until Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) intervened before the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore to remind his junior anti-US partner of who is calling the geostrategic shots in East Asia.

Now Beijing seems to have decided that Trump and his national security team also need a more tangible warning of where their confrontational approach to China is leading the US and potentially the world. It is signaling dire outcomes on trade, the South China Sea, Taiwan and the old standby threat, North Korea.

In the trade war, Beijing’s boycott of US soybeans was its first retaliation against Trump’s tariffs, but it has failed to deter the US president, who has provided some compensation for American farmers’ financial losses.

China now has threatened to curtail the export of rare earths, the minerals essential for the production of advanced batteries and other technological products. The US and other countries are seeking alternative sources and ways to reduce dependency on China’s control of those elements.

Whether Xi will consider dumping US Treasury bonds as a financial weapon remains to be

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seen, but, like many measures in the tangled economic relationship, China's economy would pay a high price for the devaluation that would follow.

However, its spokespeople are telling Washington that it is willing to pay whatever price is necessary to block US pressure, using a line they have rolled out before — just prior to initiating military conflicts with India in 1962 and Vietnam in 1979: “Don’t say we did not warn you.”

On the South China Sea, which Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte this week described as a “flashpoint for trouble,” moves and countermoves by the Chinese and US navies have dramatically increased the potential for conflict.

They are “not testing water temperature, my God, [but who] fires the first shot,” Duterte said.

Unlike former US president Barack Obama's administration, the Trump team is responding in a serious, sustained way to Beijing's claim to most of the waters and land features of the South China Sea.

As Duterte put it: “Is it right for a country to claim the whole ocean?”

The UN's arbitration tribunal, ruling on a Philippine challenge, declared China's claim to be both ahistorical and illegal.

However, Beijing scorned the decision and continued to build artificial islands on isolated outcroppings, dredging and destroying coral reefs. It then constructed military facilities, contrary to Xi's explicit promise to Obama at their meeting at Palm Springs in 2016.

Given the continued flouting of international law and personal commitments, it is left to the US as the ultimate guarantor of freedom of the seas by using its indispensable capabilities to block Beijing's maritime aggression. Fortunately, British, French, Australian and other allies are

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joining in the US Navy's freedom of navigation operations.

China wants to stop this multinational "ganging up" and is probably weighing whether to cause an incident directly against a US Navy ship or aircraft, as one of its fighter jets did against an EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft in 2001, or to choose an allied target instead and complicate a US response.

The Taiwan Strait provides another arena for Beijing to defy Western "containment" and "violations of Chinese sovereignty."

After years of the US Navy avoiding the Strait for fear of antagonizing China, the Trump administration has removed the restriction and allowed frequent routine transits. Now, allied navies also are making their presence known, incurring the ire of Beijing. An incident there is a real possibility, against a US or allied unit, or against a Taiwanese ship or airplane.

Finally, there is China's go-to crisis creator, the Kim regime. Apparently having miscalculated the Trump administration's seriousness on denuclearization and encouraged by Beijing to test the US president's resolve — possibly because of Trump's flattering words about both communist dictators — Kim went for a full US back-down on sanctions and came away from Hanoi empty-handed.

Kim has expressed frustration by doing some limited missile testing, spewing insults at US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and White House National Security adviser John Bolton for carrying out the president's policy, and by executing members of his own nuclear negotiating team.

It is possible that he is calling on Trump to rid himself of his advisers, even if not in as drastic a fashion. Or, equally possible, the North Koreans killed at an airport following the failed Hanoi talks were in the process of defecting to the West.

On all these flashpoints, the crucial test for the Trump administration will be not simply its initial response to some violent action by a Chinese naval or coast guard commander or pilot, or a

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“civilian” vessel of some kind.

The real challenge will be the US' response to China's first-level retaliation and whether Washington is prepared to move up the escalatory ladder. There will be universal calls for restraint, talks, off-ramps, allowing the Chinese to save face, etc. The assumption in all these suggestions will be that the West can be counted on to be reasonable and moderate, whereas the Chinese — and the North Koreans, to the extent that there is a coordinated provocation — are unpredictable.

The only way for the US to escape this escalation trap is to inform Beijing, and Pyongyang, privately and publicly, that they would not be provided with a graceful exit.

Washington's message should be loud and clear: Don't say we did not warn you.

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