

Has Trump become soft on China?

Written by Sushil Seth
Thursday, 20 April 2017 07:46

Even though China was right, left and center of US President Donald Trump's withering criticisms during the US presidential election, that stridency was toned down after he took office.

We had the dramatics of the telephone call from President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) congratulating Trump on his election, considered unusual after the US had established diplomatic relations with China in 1979.

Trump wanted to use Taiwan as a lever to reset US-China relations, indicating that such a concession on the part of the US must have a quid pro quo, but when Beijing stood on its "one China" principal, Trump quietly retreated from his much touted position that Taiwan was still somehow an unresolved question in a February telephone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平).

During Xi's recent US visit, the first such contact between the Chinese leader and the new US president, there was much pomp and ceremony, but very little substance. Everything from the South China Sea, to China's unfair trade advantage, to currency manipulation remained unresolved, though — Trump now believes that China is not a currency manipulator

The Chinese agreed to a "100 day plan"— whatever that means — to address the trade imbalance, but there were no details about how this might be achieved.

"We had a long discussion already. So far I have gotten nothing, but we have developed a great friendship," Trump said after the first round of talks.

Apparently, apart from their "great friendship" the two leaders failed to make progress on any of the contentious issues between their countries.

However, two important developments occurred during and immediately after Xi's US visit. One was the US missile attack from a naval strike force in the Mediterranean on a Syrian air

Has Trump become soft on China?

Written by Sushil Seth
Thursday, 20 April 2017 07:46

base from which Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime had reportedly launched a chemical attack on rebel-held territory.

Trump informed Xi of this attack during dessert in a lyrical recount of the US' power and pinpoint accuracy against the backdrop of the inhuman chemical attack. The US action, according to Trump, was endorsed by Xi.

Whether or not Xi approved of the US action is not clear, as Beijing has not commented, although Chinese leaders did not seem supportive of the Russian backing for al-Assad judging by their abstention from voting against the subsequent UN Security Council resolution.

However, if the naval strike on the Syrian air base was intended to impress the Chinese with US military power that would be questionable because China is not Syria.

What might have surprised China, and indeed other countries, was the willingness of the new US president to challenge Russia, which was supposed to be a new ally in the war against the Islamic State group. That would be worrisome, as it shows the impulsive nature of Trump.

Much more relevant for the Chinese is Trump's policy toward North Korea, at times put forward via Twitter, as with other important pronouncements, pressing Beijing to use their clout to reign in Pyongyang as it alone has the power to bring sense to the North Korean leadership.

If China failed to do this, the US would act on its own, he said.

Considering that the US has moved its navy closer the Korean Peninsula, telling Beijing and the world that the US might act alone is rather apocalyptic.

"China has great influence over North Korea. And China will either decide to help us with North Korea, or they won't," Trump said in an interview with the Financial Times. "If they do, that will be very good for China, and if they don't, it won't be good for anyone."

Has Trump become soft on China?

Written by Sushil Seth
Thursday, 20 April 2017 07:46

“If China is not going to solve North Korea, we will. That is all I am telling you,” Trump said.

To reinforce Trump’s message, US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley said that the US would “no longer take excuses from China.”

“They need to show us how concerned they are. They need to put pressure on North Korea. The only country that can stop North Korea is China... We’re going to say what we think and we’re going to move the ball and that’s what this is about,” she was quoted as saying.

However, Trump’s tone has lately softened on China. He has said that after talking to Xi he now has a better understanding of China’s difficult situation.

Despite all the implied threats from the US and pressure from China, Pyongyang still went ahead with its most recent missile test — which fizzled out — showing that the North Korean leader is impervious to threats.

Trump has even declared that China is no longer a currency manipulator, which might mean that the heat might be taken out of the trade issue, averting fear of a trade war.

Trump has said of Xi: “We have a good relationship, we have great chemistry together. I think his wife is terrific.”

In contrast, he said of Russia: “We’re not getting along with Russia at all.”

He described the relationship with Moscow as having hit “an all-time low.”

Has Trump become soft on China?

Written by Sushil Seth
Thursday, 20 April 2017 07:46

China is reportedly happy over reversal of some of Trump's pronouncements of serious charges about currency manipulation.

Shen Dingli (申丁力), an international relations expert at Fudan University in Shanghai, went so far as to say that, "He [Trump] will be the best US president for China compared with any previous US president... He is the most friendly US president ever."

However, with Trump, nothing is certain. Many of his pronouncements are uttered through social media platforms, suggesting ad hoc policymaking. Just ask the Russians.

Not so long ago, Russian President Vladimir Putin was Trump's political idol in some ways. Now, it looks like he is in the doghouse. The Trump administration is probably the most unpredictable in the annals of the US history.

Sushil Seth is a commentator in Australia.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2017/04/20](#)