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Issue Brief

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US-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue: At the Crossroads of Strategic Distrust

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Strategic Distrust has become a prominent feature and a major concern in Sino-US relations. Both sides have come to realise that engagement is a must to move forward. High-profile meetings are a reflection of this realisation. Each year, more than sixty government-to-government



dialogues take place to improve the level of mutual understanding but they are not as effective as expected. These extensive activities have failed to produce trust. Both sides are clear that a long-term constructive partnership should be built but how should it be built is a question remains unanswered. With Beijing and Washington clinging on to their old positions, the first round of the Diplomatic and Security Dialogue (DSD) exposes that the root causes of the Sino-US strategic distrust are still unaddressed. And that the declining superpower and the emerging superpower are still standing at the crossroads of the strategic distrust.

The US and Chinese senior officials met on June 21, to kick-start the DSD in Washington. Similar to the high-profile meetings held between the US and its most reliable partners in Asia-Pacific (Australia and Japan) the DSD was conducted on the formula of 2+2 (Defense and Foreign Minister) talks. Therefore, Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, and Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, represented American side and State Councilor, Yang Jeichi, and Chief of China's Central Military Commission Joint Staff Department, represented the Chinese side.

The DSD is the product of Trump-Xi Summit at Mar-a-Lago, where the two presidents decided to update the previous Strategic and Economic Dialogue and to initiate the new US-China Comprehensive Dialogue. Since the US-China strategic distrust is multi-layered, the comprehensive dialogue, including DSD has several other sub-forums: the Comprehensive Economic Dialogue; the Law Enforcement and Cyber Security Dialogue; and Social and the People-to-People Dialogue.

The DSD is a promising development in the Sino-US relation, especially in the context of Trump's anti-China election campaign. It reflects Washington and Beijing's commitment to keep promoting healthy stable bilateral ties through bilateral consensus. It is also in keeping with the previous administrations' efforts to narrow down the Sino-US differences and reach a common point of understanding on the contentious issues.

Before the dialogue, Tillerson identified three major areas of uncertainty that bedevil the two super powers relations, the North Korean question, China's behaviour in the South China Sea and sustainability of One-China-Policy.¹ Other than this, neither of the sides released any official agenda of the talks. But as expected, DSD revolved around five major themes: The South China Sea issue; North Korean Issue; maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region and military-to-military relations.

The major deliverable of the DSD is the realisation, on both sides, that engagement has gone beyond the realm of the policy preferences and rather has become a fact of Sino-US bilateral relation. Another positive outcome was the avowal of the regular military-to-military interaction. However, the American and Chinese positions have not changed yet; the senior officials mostly reaffirmed previous positions of the US and China on the issues brought in the discussion.

China opposed the development of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea and restated its commitment towards denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. It proposed the dual-track-approach for the peaceful resolution of the long-standing issue and called for an early resumption of talks on the nuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. The Chinese officials suggested that the North Korean administration was likely to abandon its nuclear programme if the US had suspended the large-scale military exercises with South Korea. They asserted that Beijing had indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea and its adjacent waters; therefore, it had every right to defend its territories and safeguard its maritime rights. On the issue of global terrorism, they affirmed China's support to the US on the basis of equality, mutual respect and mutual benefit.²

Washington, again, asked Beijing to do more to pressurise Pyongyang. Tillerson stated in a press conference after the meeting that both the sides called for denuclearisation of North Korea and taking

¹ Ankit Panda, "US, Chinese officials set to meet for first Diplomatic and Security Dialogue," *The Diplomat*, June 19, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/06/us-chinese-officials-set-to-meet-for-first-diplomatic-and-security-dialogue/>

² Report by Xinhua Agency, Chinese state media, one day after SSD. The report is available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/22/c_136386959.htm

joint actions against North Korea, which are in accordance with the UN resolutions. His statement was very vague; giving no clear hint of what exactly is the US policy to fix the issue except asking China to 'do more' in this regard. He and General Mattis remained opposed to any change of status quo and the US positions in the South China Sea. This was an indication that the US wants to keep its military forward deployed in the region. Tillerson boldly put out that America will keep asking China to improve the state of human rights. On the issues of cyberspace and nuclearisation, he maintained that China should play a major role, which was an allusion to America's resentment to China's free-riding policies.³

US decision makers see China's future behaviour uncertain and demand it to do away with the free-riding policies and bring domestic reforms. The Chinese side believes that the US wants to maintain its global hegemony and, thus, will seek to contain or upset China. Washington recently abandoned its partners in Asia-Pacific by withdrawing from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and now its pledge in the dialogue to keep its military forward deployed in the Southeast Asian region does not give an assuring signal to Beijing. In this milieu, US commitment towards its partners comes into question. It raises doubts in Beijing and contributes towards stirring strategic distrust. The Chinese view the human rights promotion agenda as a handy option to sabotage the Chinese Communist Party (CPP); for them, it is an effort to divide and weaken China. America elsewhere violates human rights – Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan are just a few examples –but demands otherwise. Endorsed by the US Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense in DSD, these ambivalent policies of the US add to the strategic distrust on the Chinese side.

The root causes of the prevailing distrust remained unaddressed in the DSD. Beijing called out for adopting rights attitudes towards each other's intentions⁴ and the US for a responsible China.⁵ Asia-pivot, the most effective tool to contain China, is defunct; TPP, the most valuable instrument to hedge China geo-economically, is discarded. That much is clear that the US has no policy on the North Korean nuclearisation and it is looking up to China for moderation. Without broader cooperation of the US partners in Asia-Pacific, America's China policies are hard to succeed.

³ "Remarks by Secretary of State," US Department of State, accessed July 10, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/06/272103.htm>

⁴ Report by Xinhua Agency, Chinese state media, one day after SSD. The report is available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/22/c_136386959.htm

⁵ "Remarks by Secretary of State," US Department of State, accessed July 10, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/06/272103.htm>

Current Sino-US equation of power can rightly be characterised by the inability of the US decision makers' to strike a balance between America's declining economic influence and maintaining its military might in the world. To maintain the strategic competition or engage in the strategic cooperation is the dilemma of the US decision makers, which is shaping the Sino-US power equation. Confronting China militarily is not fruitful to the US beyond the ideals and rhetoric. This time, the US should come to realise that it has to define the areas of strategic cooperation with China. And that it has to discard the very notion of "maintaining status quo," which is in contradiction with the dynamic changes taking place in the global economic and political landscape.