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Issue Brief

Trump-Xi Summit: Future Trajectory of Sino-US Relations

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Mar-a-Lago huddle between Trump and Xi Jinping in April 2017 is a continuation of Trump's efforts to get a better deal from China. Since the election campaign, Trump has been using China's vulnerable points as a bargain chip. And since then, he has been failing in getting any of the desired outcomes.



Amidst a very cheerful dinner between the two world leaders, the US missile strikes on Syria was a message to President Xi Jinping that the United States could strike North Korea if it wanted to. The problem is that Trump's tactics based on 'Madman Theory' are not working. Trump failed to realize that there is a difference between unpredictability, tweetable Shenanigans, incoherence, and deliverable policy goals in the areas of American retreat like Syria and Afghanistan.

The summit was all smiles. Trump announced that the meeting had made tremendous progress. He added that, with this summit, the potential problems would go away.¹ President Xi Jinping was similarly upbeat saying, "we have engaged in deeper understanding and have built trust- a preliminary working relationship and friendship."²

Despite these high notes of optimism, the summit arrived at nothing concrete in terms of structural and institutional mechanisms to deal with the issues adding to the soaring tensions. No new agreement was signed. There were no announcements of reaching an understanding either on North Korean issue, improving access for American companies in China, and on managing US trade deficit in Sino-American trade. Yet, the two world leaders announced a 100-day plan to come to grips with the trade disputes.

Even though the summit was quite a showdown, assuming it a success in easing strained Sino-American ties would be a leap of faith.

The summit, however, had a Nixonian style, missile strikes on Syria as one of its component. China mocked the strikes on Syria right after President Xi left the United States. The state-run newspapers *China Daily* and the *Global Times* ridiculed the strikes by calling them as an “act of a weekend politician who needed to flex his muscle.”³ Instead of coming up with a concrete policy on Syria, the US opted for a missile strike. Missile strike is definitely no strategy. It is in consistency with the Trump’s practice of taking U-turns on foreign policy after every event. Fareed Zakaria explained this quite interestingly. “He bashed Japan in the election campaign and, surprisingly, invited Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, to the summit. More surprisingly, Trump extolled Abe as a true friend and an ally. Having threatened to upend the one-China policy, Trump wound up meekly affirming it in a phone call with President Xi Jinping.”⁴ On 4 Feb, 2017, President Trump told Xi Jinping, “The United States would honor the One China Policy.”⁵ When he will take U-turn in Syria, time will tell.

However, Trump did not rule out the possibility of imposing tariffs on Chinese goods. After the Summit, he wrote in a tweet that “goodwill and friendship was formed, but only time will tell on trade.”⁶ Automobile, healthcare, internet and IT, finance, logistics and media are the sectors of contention between the two global powers. Trump tweeted that he will offer a better deal if China solves the North Korean problem.⁷ Using trade deals as a bargaining tactics to settle security disputes may spark a trade war in future.

The summit left many questions unanswered and vacuum to be filled by Beijing. Unlike previous strategy of an outright retreat from Asia Pacific after cancelling the Trans-Pacific Partnership, this time the United States is pressurizing China to assume the role of a mediator in the region. Take North Korea for instance. The priority agenda of the summit was North Korea. With nothing concrete achieved except considering it a serious threat to peace, this issue is only going to add to the tensions. Beijing has pressed North Korea to abandon its nuclear program,⁸ but it is certainly guarding its interests in the region. The Chinese Defense Ministry said that THAAD will destroy stability in the Korean Peninsula and announced to conduct combat-oriented live-fire drills and test new weapons to protect national security and regional stability.⁹ Whether these actions of military alertness pointed towards North Korea spillover or America’s strategic unpredictability is only a matter of time. The message, however, is clear that Beijing is fully prepared to deal with any instability in the region.

Trump demonstrated that he had no new policy to deal with the long contentious issues. Xi Jinping demonstrated the flexibility of a rising global power to deal with the soaring tensions in a responsible

manner. However, the Summit revealed that America has no strategy to work with China except pressuring it to cooperate on certain hyped issues. It only indicates that China-US partnership is not in offing. And that uncertainty prevails over Sino-US relations.

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