

ISAS Brief

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Implications of the Xi Jinping-Donald Trump Meeting for South Asia

On 6 April, 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping and his wife arrived in Florida for a first bilateral meeting between the Chinese leader and the new American President Donald Trump. The United States (US) President hosted his guests at his private summer residence, Mar-a-Lago. The two-day meeting was heavily scrutinised for indications on the state and future of China-US relations. This is a relationship that is of great importance to South Asia, given the role of geopolitics and the strategic involvement of both in the region.

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Introduction

During the United States (US) presidential election campaign in November 2016, then-presidential candidate, Donald Trump, accused China of stealing American jobs, of artificially maintaining a trade imbalance in China's favour and manipulating its currency. He promised to take a tough stance against the world's second largest economy and to implement a review of trade relations between the two. In the run-up to the April 2017 meeting between President Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Florida, analysts had voiced concern

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and urged caution, warning against the possibility of a trade war, which would be to the detriment of the world economy. However, perhaps to the surprise of many, the meeting showcased good rapport between the two leaders, with President Trump talking about the “great chemistry” that he and the Chinese leader were able to establish between themselves.

While no major outcomes were expected of the summit, a surprise did occur at Mar-a-Lago. Shortly before sitting down to dinner with Xi and his delegation, President Trump had ordered a missile attack on an airfield that Syrian aircraft had used to launch a chemical attack against a rebel-held town, resulting in numerous casualties, many of them children. The American strike could have been damaging and embarrassing to China, given its position on Syria, which is inclined towards supporting the President Bashar al-Assad regime. However, at the dinner table, President Xi acquiesced, saying that the attack on children was unacceptable, thus justifying the American response.

Similarly, it had been anticipated that North Korea’s advances in missile and nuclear weapons programmes would top the agenda at the two-day meeting. Prior to the summit, President Trump had said that, if Beijing, the North’s main patron, would not act to rein in its neighbour, the US would be willing to go it alone. The strike on Syria, it was observed, was meant to signal America’s resolve and determination.

Prior to the meeting at Mar-a-Lago, much of the attention had been focused on the potential for, and likely ramifications of, an economic conflict erupting between the US and China. During the meeting and in its aftermath, it appeared as if geopolitics have moved centre-stage. President Xi and President Trump have conversed twice via telephone in the wake of further North Korean tests and amid demonstrations of its military might. If geopolitics is re-emerging as an instrument and goal of American foreign policy, this has important implications for South Asia.

Finding a New Global Equilibrium

Geopolitics, as defined and practiced by one of its most well-known practitioners, Henry Kissinger, entails a careful and coordinated balance of power strategy, for the sake of establishing equilibrium and order. In a November 2016 interview with Kissinger in *The*

Atlantic, the former US Secretary of State under the Ford and Nixon administrations, and doyen of American foreign policy ever since, spoke about the long-term importance of Sino-American relations, the most consequential countries for international order. Central to his analysis is the need for both countries to remain engaged in international affairs and to find common projects for joint action in order to stabilise the world. Aside from a number of meetings said to have taken place between Kissinger, President Trump and various senior aides, including Jared Kushner (the President's son-in-law and Senior Advisor), key figures in the Trump administration have been favoured by Kissinger, most notably, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Furthermore, Kissinger's former acolyte, K T McFarland, was appointed President Trump's Deputy National Security Advisor (but currently likely to be reassigned), and previously served under Kissinger in the 1970s in his National Security Council.

It can be argued that, under the alleged influence of Kissinger, the Trump administration is looking for ways to find common ground where China and the US can act, including on such irksome issues as North Korea. In fact, President Trump has indicated that he is willing to use trade as a bargaining chip, promising China a better trade deal in return for cooperation on North Korea.

This approach may, in fact, be transferred to Afghanistan where the US currently has about 8,400 troops stationed in the Nangarhar Province, located on the border area with Pakistan and where the US military dropped "the mother of all bombs" on 13 April 2017, targeting an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) cave and tunnel complex. The US counter-terror mission is separate from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led effort to train, advise and assist Afghan army and police forces. President Trump's stated emphasis has been on eradicating ISIS but it is argued by many that the war against the Taliban continues to be the greater challenge, illustrated most recently by the brazen attack on a major Afghan army base, which caused numerous casualties.

Most recently, US National Security Advisor, Herber Raymond McMaster, visited Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. McMaster has a long involvement in the wider region, developing US counter-insurgency strategy under General David Petraeus as his special assistant in Iraq from 2007 to 2008, and later deployed to Afghanistan in 2010. As the first high-level envoy of the Trump administration to visit South Asia, there was much speculation

about the content of his talks in the three capitals. In Afghanistan, McMaster referred to the Afghan government as a ‘reliable’ partner; in Pakistan, he conveyed the need to strengthen bilateral relations and, in India, McMaster emphasised the importance of the US-India strategic relationship and reaffirmed India’s designation as a major defence partner.

If the Kissinger logic holds sway, geopolitics will be central to determining the US strategy in Afghanistan, which will be primarily to hold Chinese and Russian influence in check. In the past, during the Cold War, Kissinger’s influence in the White House heavily biased policy in favour of Pakistan. Today, the calculations may be slightly different, given the even closer ties that have developed between Pakistan and China. With Chinese influence having grown significantly in South Asia as well as India’s capacity and willingness to act as a major power, India is likely to be seen in terms of its balancing potential.

Conclusion

The question for South Asia is how countries in the region are going to deal with a more abrasive US. From President Trump’s manner of engaging China and managing the current crisis in North Korea, it appears that economics has become an instrument to attain leverage, and force may be used, demonstrated and threatened. Whether this strategy will be successful remains to be seen. However, the Trump-Xi summit demonstrated an interest on both sides to establish a working relationship, and communication has continued between the two on North Korea.

In the run-up to India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to the US that is currently being planned, it will be crucial to watch whether the H-1B visa scheme becomes a similar means of exerting pressure, possibly to extract greater material commitment from India in Afghanistan. From India’s perspective, managing this linkage of economics with geopolitical strategy will be a challenge. It will also be an opportunity for India to ensure that it is part of any regional initiative on Afghanistan and not on the outside, as was the case with the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, comprising the US, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, which met officially for the first time in January 2016 to discuss peace talks.