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President Trump Should Exercise Extreme Caution in Exchange with Chinese Leader Xi Jinping

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President Donald Trump is scheduled to meet with Chinese leader Xi Jinping at Mar-a-Lago on April 6 and 7.¹ The President should be aware that this is a meeting fraught with risk.

The Chinese pay very close attention to language associated with every meeting and statement. They will try to ensure that their terminology, from “win-win relationship” to “new type of great power relations” are employed—and will exploit those references in subsequent meetings.

Given that Secretary of Defense John Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have few supporting positions filled, there is a real danger that the Chinese will try to exploit the lack of expertise in the highest levels of government in order to gain advantage over the Trump Administration.

As important, while President Trump undoubtedly hopes to have more productive discussions with President Xi by hosting him at his home at Mar-a-Lago, the Chinese typically do not engage in “informal” talks. Indeed, the 2013 “shirt sleeve summit” between President Xi and President Barack Obama at the Annenberg estate arguably worsened U.S.–China relations. President Xi refused even to stay at Sunnylands, stating that the Chinese could not be sure of their electronic security.²

In the ideal situation, the Trump Administration would have waited to invite President Xi to the U.S. until more expertise is in place and more legwork can be done ahead. At this point, withdrawing the invitation would be variously interpreted as highly insulting to the Chinese or as reflecting lack of preparation on the part of the Administration. The best that can be done at this point is to make sure that the Administration is familiar with the terms of art that are now part of U.S.–China relations, such as the difference between the “one China principle,” which Beijing endlessly invokes, and the “one China policy,” which has been part of the U.S. approach to the issue for decades.

The Administration should be similarly well-versed in the outlines of America’s commitment to Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) and President Reagan’s Six Assurances. President Xi is certain to raise his concerns about Taiwan, and President Trump needs to be able to respond firmly with a restatement of U.S. policy, and then quickly move on. There should be no discussion of Taiwan beyond each side stating their policy. In short, America’s Taiwan policy is not open to negotiation. Doing anything more than restating the U.S. position risks giving the Chinese the wrong impression.

Beyond this, President Trump should familiarize himself with certain Chinese negotiating methods, focus on key messages, and avoid key pitfalls.

Chinese Negotiating Methods

First, the Chinese negotiation approach is to establish principles from the top, not work out details from the bottom. Details are for underlings.

Second, the Chinese will exploit those principles in subsequent negotiations and meetings, in order to

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portray the U.S. as violating agreements and China as upholding them. Thus, using Chinese terms such as “win-win” or “mutual respect for core interests” implies U.S. endorsement of the Chinese stance. (Conversely, if one could persuade the Chinese to adopt American terms, the same could be turned on Beijing.)

Key Messages

First, the Chinese are focused on obtaining certain results. Those remain consistent, including defending their core interests. These consist of getting the U.S. to accede to Chinese dominance of the East and South China Sea, abandon its support for Taiwan, and, increasingly, weaken its commitment to other allies in the region. The United States will defend its core interests as well. This is a key message that President Trump needs to get across to President Xi.

Second, those core interests include U.S. commitment to its allies, commitment to enforcing the international rules of trade, and protection of freedom of the seas. Insofar as Beijing believes that the U.S. will not stand up for its allies or respond to its violation of the rules, the Administration must disabuse China of those notions.

Key Pitfalls

The Chinese know their talking points, and will stick to them. They have no problem repeating those talking points ad infinitum.

The Chinese will hold the U.S. to any commitment that is made or is apparently made. In this regard, then, it is essential for President Trump to avoid creating a precedent that will straitjacket him or successors in the future. A fourth communique is not necessary.

If this meeting must proceed, the best it can do is to refrain from much substantive discussions, particularly anything beyond trade and economics. The world will respond well to a message that acknowledges the differences between the U.S. and China, but affirms that China need not be an enemy of the U.S. Beyond that, at this early point in the Administration, President Trump should avoid any new policy pronouncements or commitments.

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1. “Trump Meeting with Chinese President Xi Expected Next Month, Official Says,” Fox News, March 13, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/03/13/trump-meeting-with-chinese-president-xi-expected-next-month-official-says.html> (accessed March 27, 2017).
 2. Philip Rucker, “At U.S.-China Shirt-sleeves Summit, Formalities and Suspicions Abound,” *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/at-us-china-shirt-sleeves-summit-formalities-and-suspicions-abound/2013/06/09/2ab97c06-d125-11e2-a73e-826d299ff459_story.html?utm_term=.6d04d572039f (accessed March 27, 2017).
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