



An NCAFP U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue Conference Report

**By Ralph A. Cossa
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Introduction

On March 30, 2017, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy conducted a U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue which addressed the overall China-U.S. relationship, the North Korean nuclear issue, and the current state of military-to-military relations, while also examining the current view from Washington. The meeting took place just after the official announcement of the summit meeting in early April between Presidents Xi and Trump.

A group of roughly 30 eminent foreign policy and security specialists from both countries participated in the full day of discussions. The dialogue was cordial and constructive with all sharing a desire for improved Sino-U.S. relations.

Key Takeaways

- While there is usually a degree of uncertainty and anxiety associated with the advent of new U.S. administrations, the levels seem higher this year than usual and are exacerbated by President Trump's unpredictability and tendency to issue tweets that may have policy implications (or may not).
- That said, the relationship currently appears to be on track as a result of President Trump's willingness, at President Xi's request, to reaffirm America's "one China" policy.
- All looked toward the Trump-Xi Mar-a-Lago Summit in early April with a certain degree of apprehension while seeing it as an important opportunity to set the framework for the future relationship.
- Expectations were low when it came to expected outcomes or new initiatives emanating from the Summit. It was, nonetheless, an important opportunity for the two leaders to establish a personal relationship and "set the tone."



- Chinese colleagues stressed the need for “mutual respect” as a foundation for the relationship while Americans stressed the need, under the new U.S. Administration, for a “results-oriented approach.” Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s endorsement of a “win-win” approach should be viewed not as an endorsement of China’s New Type of Major Country Relations slogan but as a reflection of President Trump’s frequent admonition that in the past only China had been “winning” in the relationship.
- Americans also cautioned that we should not let anxiety over possible future steps that may be taken by the Trump Administration distract from some current steps being taken by the Xi Administration that are already causing strains in the relationship. The crackdown on NGOs in China was specifically referenced along with concerns about perceived (by the U.S.) increased assertiveness in the South China and East China Seas, among other issues.
- There was widespread agreement that the most serious and urgent area of contention today was over how best to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue. Chinese participants continued to call for both strictly enforced sanctions and renewed dialogue, as did a number of Americans, but there was also a call by many Americans for tighter sanctions and a tougher approach. The Trump Administration has rejected “strategic patience” and put the use of force, preemptive attack, and all other options on the table, much to the dismay of most Chinese (and several American) participants. Since North Korea appears intent on ratcheting up tensions, both sides need to be better prepared to respond to the next provocation.
- At the tactical level, relations between the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) and the U.S. military have seldom or ever been better. The degree of contacts and dialogue mechanisms (except on strategic nuclear issues) has expanded and Chinese participation in multi-national and bilateral training opportunities has increased.
- At the strategic level, the reverse seems to be true. PLA literature more and more frequently identifies the U.S. as the primary threat and both sides see the other as at least a potential enemy. While the U.S. military sees North Korea as the most immediate and likely threat and Russia as the greatest existential threat, the PLA seems focused first and foremost on the U.S. threat. Political leadership is needed to set the proper tone in the broader military-to-military relationship.



- In short, both sides saw the value in a cooperative, constructive relationship and saw the upcoming Summit as a good opportunity to establish a positive framework for the future, while understanding that a positive outcome was not guaranteed, especially since, on the U.S. side, the presidential leadership team was still far from complete.
- While not discussed in detail, there was also a general recognition that the trade and economic dimension of the relationship would take on increased importance, although President Trump’s famed “transactional” approach should not lead Chinese colleagues to conclude that U.S. national security interests could be traded or set aside in return for increased economic benefits.
- Finally, Chinese colleagues repeatedly stressed that a stable Sino-U.S. relationship and stable overall security environment were critical as Chinese leaders prepared for the all-important 19th Party Congress later in the year.

Overview of U.S.-China Relations

Our Chinese presenter stressed that Chinese leadership would like to see the U.S. and China have “normal” major power relations. This means the two should focus on areas of common interest regionally and globally while managing disputes, such as in the South China Sea. He noted the U.S. and China were not allies or likely to become so but that we needed to have a cooperative relationship aimed at managing our inevitable competition. He saw the need for consensus on a general framework or theme for bilateral relations going forward and hoped this would emerge from the impending Xi-Trump Summit. The Chinese recognize the Trump Administration has a different approach, particularly regarding economic issues, but they had expected a harder line after the election regardless of who won.

Beijing recognizes that Washington’s largest concern right now is North Korea and how the two sides cooperate regarding North Korea will have a major impact on the relationship. China is expected to do more regarding North Korea and will, although its ability to influence North Korea is limited.



The Chinese also remain concerned about any change in policy or practice vis-à-vis Taiwan, including enhanced contacts or arms sales. (Taiwan, while clearly important to China, was not discussed in detail at the meeting since this dialogue had been preceded by two days of more intense trilateral cross-Taiwan Strait dialogue, which will be reported on separately.) He saw as a positive gesture the lack (thus far) of U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the South China Sea, while noting that it was not FONOPS per se but rather U.S. penetration of Chinese territorial water and airspace that was of major concern since these actions were seen as challenges to Chinese national security and sovereignty. He concluded that the Chinese side would like to see continued engagement and close stable relations maintained or enlarged during the next four years of the Trump Administration.

The American presenter shared his Chinese colleague's desire for a positive, constructive Sino-U.S. relationship and acknowledged the anxiety, by Chinese and Americans alike, over the generally unpredictable nature of the Trump Administration's foreign policy, while nonetheless stressing that at the senior level, a solid national security team was now in place. Tweets aside, there have been important elements of continuity in the Administration's Asia policy. The centrality of U.S. alliances and America's commitment to the defense of South Korea and Japan have been reaffirmed by President Trump, Secretary of State Tillerson, and Secretary of Defense Mattis. President Trump, *at the request of President Xi*, has also reaffirmed America's long-standing "one China" policy. While acknowledging the risk in over-analysis of words, especially in the early days of a new administration, the White House's stressing that the reaffirmation was *at President Xi's request* could lead an observer to several different conclusions. Could the request later be denied? Was it transactional and, if so, what was (or will be) the quid pro quo? Did the Chinese interpret this as a good will gesture or as Trump backing down in the face of Xi's demand? It's still not clear what, if anything, should really be read into this caveat.

While the U.S. speaker acknowledged that neither Presidents Xi nor Trump wanted their bilateral relationship to be defined by North Korea, Pyongyang was likely to force this issue upon them and how the two sides cooperated (or failed to do so) would play a key role in defining the future relationship. Rightly or wrongly, there is a clear belief in the Trump Administration that Beijing can and should do more to influence Pyongyang's behavior.



He also noted uncertainty regarding the Trump Administration’s nuclear policy, given the President’s assertion that the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be the “top of the pack” and Chinese concerns over continued “strategic stability.” He cautioned that the centrality of trade (and Trump’s desires for a “good deal”) should not be seen as willingness to trade strategic interests for a better trade deal. America’s system of checks and balances and the key role of Congress will always be an important, if not deciding factor. In closing he noted that some Americans joke that when China says “win-win” it means China wins today and then China wins again tomorrow. Clearly this is not what Secretary Tillerson had in mind when he echoed the Chinese phrase.

The ensuing discussion focused on several interrelated topics. Many Americans expressed concern about the current clampdown against NGOs in China and the impact this could have on people-to-people exchanges and better understanding between the two sides. They were also concerned about perceived aggressive behavior by China in the South China Sea and East China Sea and Beijing’s apparent on-again, off-again enforcement of sanctions against North Korea. While few thought that China could or should “solve the North Korea problem for us,” virtually all thought China could and should do more over a sustained period. Some Americans also expressed concern that the Trump Administration would put less priority on Chinese domestic actions and that this would have a negative impact on American soft power as well as on China’s advancement in the areas of human rights and liberalization. Ironically, it was a Chinese interlocutor who reassured Americans that U.S. soft power—the attractiveness of American values, ideals, culture, and tradition (including our system of checks and balances)—was alive and well; it was Chinese soft power that was most in need of being developed.

Considerable attention was also paid to both sides’ hopes and fears associated with the upcoming Xi-Trump Summit. Expectations on both sides were generally low although there was hope (and a clear desire) that a new, lasting framework would emerge that would guide the relationship over the next several years. It was unclear what quid pro quos each side would seek and how they would manage the potentially explosive trade issue. Concerns were also expressed on the U.S. side about the Summit perhaps being premature, since many key players were not yet in place in Washington and so much of the day-to-day work is done at the assistant and deputy assistant secretary level.



Chinese participants were pleased with Secretary Tillerson’s endorsement of China’s “no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation” slogan which they interpreted as de facto support of Xi’s New Type of Major Country Relations formulation, which had been initially accepted but later discarded by the Obama Administration. There was some hope (but no great expectation) that President Trump would utter this phrase at the Summit. Americans were divided over the wisdom of Tillerson’s formulation but cautioned that U.S. and Chinese interpretations of “win-win” were considerably different and that the Trump Administration’s major complaint about China was, at least when it came to trade, that only China was “winning.” From a Chinese perspective, it was clear that they saw “mutual respect” as the single most important component. Were the Trump Administration to develop a slogan, “a results-oriented relationship” would be a central component.

Chinese traditional concerns about the role of American alliances were mentioned but not dwelled upon, with several Chinese acknowledging that they did not personally view the alliances as threatening and perhaps were even of some value (in keeping Japan and Korea from going nuclear), but noted that the Chinese public was still concerned about American containment and encirclement. Americans replied that those Chinese who knew better, including the central government, needed to do a better job of informing the Chinese public. They noted that many Americans also believe China is trying to undermine the U.S. alliance system and push America out of Asia, accusations our Chinese colleagues denied.

The North Korea Challenge

There was broad general agreement that North Korea presented the greatest immediate challenge both to regional stability and to the development of close cooperative Sino-U.S. relations. Both sides saw the need to contain and rollback Pyongyang’s nuclear programs and the importance of regional stability. The devil was in the details and how each prioritized its objectives vis- à-vis the North.



The American presenter argued that the U.S. and China are each separately approaching an important strategic tipping point on North Korea for the first time since 1950; both have critical decisions to make regarding North Korea and their responses will shape the future of the Korean Peninsula and the nature of the China-U.S. relationship. There is recognition in Washington that all previous approaches toward North Korea have failed and a new approach is needed; an approach that relies solely on diplomacy and dialogue won't yield positive results. There is also a prevailing belief that China has been unwilling to use its leverage and unique relationship to affect North Korean behavior in any fundamental way and this has led to growing dissatisfaction and impatience with China's policy and actions. As a result, secondary sanctions are likely against Chinese businesses (some were in fact applied the day after our meeting) and North Korea will in all probability be a main topic at the upcoming Summit.

The U.S. speaker further noted that the North Korean nuclear and missile challenge is transforming itself from a regional to a mainland U.S. threat and it is reasonable to assume that the Trump Administration will be particularly sensitive to Pyongyang's ability to strike the continental U.S. How this changing threat assessment translates into policy remains uncertain but we are in new, uncharted, dangerous territory and Washington and Beijing are not on same page on how to deal with it. He believes the North Korea threat is growing, and time is not on our side.

The Chinese presenter agreed that the North Korea nuclear challenge is the single most important security issue between the U.S. and China; China wants to cooperate but the challenge is how to do so. He described the three stages of Chinese policy regarding North Korea: stage one (1949-92) centered around defending North Korea; stage two (1992-2014) saw a more diversified policy following China-Republic of Korea (ROK) normalization, centered around dialogue such as the Six-Party Talks (which failed to stop the North Korea nuclear program); stage three (2014-date) is characterized by a loss of direction and debate over what poses the greatest threat and challenge to China: North Korean nuclear weapons, Japan remilitarization, or the U.S. rebalance/stronger alliances? This has caused a dilemma for China and prompted a big debate, which has been complicated by the U.S./ROK decision to deploy the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile system to the Korean Peninsula.



Despite this dilemma, China's general principles regarding North Korea are clear: any policy will be based on national interest, not ideology; the goal will remain peace, stability (no regime change), and denuclearization; the means to achieve this goal is still via dialogue and consultation (but beyond just the Six-Party Talks) and Chinese support for a freeze and tighter sanctions. He concluded that the two sides need real cooperation, must avoid any type of military attack, need a new dialogue mechanism, and that the U.S. should continue strategic patience.

A spirited debate then ensued focused on a number of issues. While the topic of THAAD was not dwelled upon, the two sides clearly saw the issue differently. Chinese maintained that it was a strategic issue given that the system could put China's second-strike capabilities at risk. Americans saw the Chinese objection as more political than military or technical, aimed at creating difficulties for the U.S.-ROK alliance while impacting South Korean domestic politics at a particularly sensitive time. Chinese rejection of U.S. offers to provide technical briefings on THAAD capabilities reinforced this U.S. suspicion. As one American put it, given the extremely low probability of an all-out nuclear exchange between the U.S. and China and the relatively high probability of North Korean missile attacks against South Korea, Japan, or U.S. bases in both countries, Chinese insistence that such a self-defense system was "unnecessary" and a real threat to China seem disingenuous. Another American noted that a Chinese reversal of its position on THAAD would go a long way toward repairing currently damaged relations between Beijing and Seoul.

Both sides were in general agreement that dialogue mechanisms to date have not worked and that North Korea appears determined to maintain and improve its nuclear weapons and delivery system capabilities. Chinese participants were more inclined to believe that a resumption of dialogue combined with a freeze—no nuclear/missile tests for no (or at least reduced) U.S./ROK joint military exercises—would help manage the situation. While some Americans agreed, others saw a freeze as incomplete and providing false hope. They stressed that only significantly increased pressure, or perhaps even credible threats of regime change were essential to return the North to serious dialogue about denuclearization. There was general consensus that employing any military option was a last result and that the implications and consequences needed to be seriously thought through.



No strategy toward North Korea could be completely successful without full support from South Korea, of course, and with special presidential elections currently underway, there was uncertainty as to the direction in which the new ROK government would proceed vis-à-vis the North. While a Progressive win seems most likely and Progressive governments have been more inclined to pursue dialogue and a softer approach toward the North, circumstances on the Peninsula have changed dramatically in the wake of Pyongyang's continued nuclear and missile tests and the assassination of Kim Jong Nam—developments that will limit any new ROK government's options. The Americans seem convinced that THAAD deployment would proceed regardless of the election outcome; the Chinese seemed less sure of this conclusion.

Chinese colleagues stressed that, as in the U.S., there was a wide-ranging debate in China over the future direction of North Korea policy. Chinese were more sympathetic toward North Korean security concerns but also saw Kim Jong Un as a potentially dangerous leader and stressed that he had not yet been allowed to visit China, an indication of Chinese discontent. China, they claimed, was also more strictly enforcing sanctions and would continue to apply increased pressure on the North, while still recognizing Pyongyang's stubbornness in responding to pressure. Chinese were looking for Xi to "set the tone" on North Korea policy during the Summit with President Trump. Americans were watching to see how this new tone, if/when set, would be played out along the China-North Korea border and during future UN Security Council deliberations. It was noted that North Korea frequently uses the setting of events like the upcoming Summit to conduct acts of provocation; were the two sides ready to jointly and effectively respond if this again proved to be the case?

One Chinese interlocutor surprised (and delighted) the American side when he stated that perhaps the time had come for China and the U.S. to have a serious discussion about various North Korean contingencies. He noted that China has serious concerns about instability and potential regime collapse in the North that need to be addressed. Other Chinese, while acknowledging Chinese concerns, seemed less certain that the time was ripe for contingency planning discussions. Americans were generally understanding of Chinese security concerns with at least one differentiating between regime change/collapse and the collapse of the North Korean state (i.e., reunification).



In the final analysis, both China and the U.S. want a stable and secure nuclear-weapons free Korean Peninsula. The disagreement is over how to get there from here. Both also agree that without close Sino-U.S. (and ROK) cooperation and coordination, no solution is likely and that North Korea will continue to try to prevent this cooperation and instigate tensions within and among the involved parties. To reinforce an earlier point, how the two sides deal with North Korea will have a profound impact both on Korean Peninsula security and on the nature of future Sino-U.S. relations. All eyes will be on Mar-a-Lago to see what tone is set.

Military-to-Military Relations

The American speaker began his presentation by stating that, at the narrow institutional level, military-to-military relations were more stable and resilient than they had been for decades, if ever. This was an outgrowth of the tone set at the Sunnylands Summit between Presidents Obama and Xi. There has been more direct military-to-military contact between the two sides both bilaterally and in multilateral settings. A hot line has been established (although not frequently used) and the two sides collaborated in the development of a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) to avoid or manage maritime incidents.

But at the same time cooperation was expanding at the tactical level, there was growing strategic mistrust on both sides regarding the other's future intentions. The competition and tensions were most intense in the Asia-Pacific region. Our speaker also opined that nuclear issues could become a major cause for concern in the future, as could growing concerns over cyber and outer space competition.

Of particular concern, maritime affairs appear to have moved to the forefront of the relationship, not just in the South China and East China Seas, but also surrounding the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) and Maritime Silk Road initiatives. It was important, he noted, that the two sides search for areas of cooperation and risk reduction against this background of increased competition.



The U.S. presenter concluded by noting that military competition will be shaped by civilian policy choices, with Asia at the epicenter; third country players will further complicate the equation. Beijing and Washington should not permit military competition to have a life of its own and undercut the broader relationship; hence the need for risk reduction and confidence building measures.

The Chinese presenter also noted the increase in friction between the two militaries and saw the U.S. rebalance or pivot to Asia as the primary cause. He noted that each country sees the other as its primary security challenge and primary opponent, even while outlining some positive developments, such as CUES and China's participation in last year's U.S.-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise. He rejected any comparison between the Sino-U.S. military relationship and that which existed between the U.S. and USSR during the Cold War, noting that no conflict/no confrontation remained shared objectives. He remarked that in the past, military-to-military discussions were one of the first casualties whenever there were increased tensions between the two countries but that the relationship has developed to a point where dialogue should not be stopped for political reasons.

Like his American counterpart, the Chinese speaker saw the North Korean nuclear issue at a critical point, while cautioning against preemptive responses that could lead to greater instability or war on the Peninsula. The situation in the East and South China Seas seems to have relaxed, however, although Chinese remain concerned about some recent statements by President Trump and Secretary Tillerson that would lead to unnecessary and undesirable maritime confrontation. China continued to promote a "dual-track approach" in the South China Sea and will seek cooperation and avoid militarization.

All Chinese saw President Trump's reaffirmation of the American one China policy as conducive to stability but remained concerned about major risks to cross-Strait stability caused by the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's rejection of the '92 Consensus as the basis for future cross-Strait cooperation. Chinese also worried about an upgrading of the U.S.-Taiwan defense relationship.



Both sides were increasingly concerned about lack of cooperation in the nuclear, cyber, and space domains and Chinese concerns about maintaining strategic stability were on the rise. While the terms “rebalance” or “pivot” were likely to disappear, Chinese still remained concerned about U.S. efforts to upgrade its Asia alliances in a way that could restrict or counterbalance China. While the future offered both opportunities and challenges, at present the challenges loomed larger. In near term, therefore, given current uncertainties, the two sides need to focus on crisis management. China needs to face the fact that U.S. alliances will remain and can play a constructive role while the U.S. should transform its alliances to make them less exclusive and less confrontational. Dialogue and exchange are necessary and more important when differences are big; it is imperative to avoid an arms race and a security dilemma.

The discussion session that followed largely reinforced the concerns and observations outlined in the two presentations. Chinese interlocutors expressed traditional concerns about Taiwan arms sales and THAAD but rejected the idea that China was “trying to push the U.S. out of Asia.” There was a big difference, one Chinese scholar observed, between keeping the U.S. off China’s coast and kicking the U.S. out of Asia. Another noted that dialogue on maritime issues was most important but that military-to-military dialogue needed to be integrated into regional policy dialogues and that the PLA needed a more comprehensive understanding of U.S. regional policies. The South China Sea was currently quiet since both sides have shown great restraint since the UN Tribunal ruling. China places a high priority on maintaining a stable environment as it focuses on preparations for the all-important 19th Party Congress later this year.

U.S. Policy

While the above sessions concentrated on differing views between the two sides on various security issues, the luncheon discussion focused on trying to gain a better understanding of the prevailing view(s) in Washington regarding the U.S.-China relationship. U.S. China policy is still in the formative stage and the upcoming Summit is encouraging focus on its overall China policy. There was broad pre-election consensus that China policy needed to change and it indeed appears to be changing.



There is a sense that popular support in the U.S. for the relationship had been deteriorating for a number of reasons; principal among them was the largely bipartisan belief that the U.S. was not getting equal benefit out of the economic relationship. The U.S. has been a major contributor toward China's economic success but this has not led to an increasingly open China governed by the rule of law and respect for the rules of the road that Washington expected. The U.S. has not imposed sufficient costs on China for its protectionist policies. As our Chinese colleagues themselves acknowledged, a more hardline approach to China, especially in the area of trade, was (and should be) anticipated. Reciprocity (as a general principle) will be a key component and demand; cooperation will be driven by mutual interests.

The U.S. will remain a key player in the Asia-Pacific and any emerging Asia strategy will be based on the foundation of a strong alliance system. The U.S. does not seek division of Asia into spheres of influence, an "accommodationalist" approach, an arms race or trade war, a reduction in commitment to Taiwan, military encounters or confrontation, or reduced U.S. involvement in Asia or the world. The U.S. also wants to establish a constructive relationship with China where possible, including encouraging increased Chinese cooperation in dealing with the threat posed to our mutual interests by North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

The prevailing view in Washington is that China has mismanaged the relationship. China had willing partners in Washington, and in broad academic and business communities but instead pursued a "China first" policy which included an academic crackdown and many business problems that led to the growing view that China is unfair in its dealings. This impression is not uncorrectable, but China will have to work hard to fix it.

It was widely acknowledged during the lunch discussion that a sense of uncertainty and anxiety currently exists in China as the new U.S. Administration formulates its policies and learns the precision with which specific wording is used. Chinese (and American) analysts were cautioned not to misinterpret colloquialisms. As one American put it only half-jokingly, "There will always be a slogan gap between Beijing and Washington."



Predictions about what could or could not be accomplished at the Summit varied and expectations remained low. Nonetheless, it seemed certain there will be a more business-like approach in which the leaders can hopefully set the tone and establish the ground rules for the future relationship.

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A U.S.-CHINA STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

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