

# **An Effect of Trump and More: The Emerging Retrenchment of China's Strategic Posture**

By concluding that The United States can better achieve its goals by flattering a Chinese leader, Trump seemed to signal a reversal of roles: The United States may now need China's help more than the other way around. Undoubtedly, President Xi will, with certain limitations, exploit this strategic situation to his best.

Due to various causes, China's strategic posture in East Asia and the Western Pacific from November 2012 when Xi Jinping became China's top leader until roughly one year before the Chinese Communist Party's 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress was characterized mainly by assertiveness and expansion with hardliner actions. They included continued and more drastic buildup of strategic military forces, dramatic expansion of China's strategic military activities, intensified strategic rivalry and even an arms race with the United States over the western part of the Western Pacific, continued intensive military confrontation with Japan, massive reclamation of land and deployment of military capabilities in South China Sea, and escalation of the strategic/military partnership with Russia.

These strategic actions resulted in both positive and negative consequences for China itself from a Chinese perspective. They strengthened China's military/strategic "hard power", extended its strategic presence, created or enhanced its "position of strength" in the disputed spots and areas, but damaged China's international "soft power", made the gap between its nice words and harsh deeds more prominent, further complicated its peripheral diplomatic/strategic situation while increased remarkably risk of conflict with Japan as well as the United States, and further "mobilized" them militarily. Moreover, it increased the possibility of some severe strategic overstretch of China.

However, there were already changed or changing situations, both domestic and international. Domestically, a slow but adamant downturn of economic growth and much increased financial delicacies, together with much increased need for funds for other indispensable national expenses, made sustained assertive strategic posture potentially problematic. But, more important was the international risks of military conflict with Japan as well as the United States, further deterioration of relationship with maritime neighboring countries, and possible backfire effects in terms of prompting U.S. military technological advancement and the Japanese search for increased military rights and prowess. There was also the drastic change of the Philippines' foreign policy, which "forced" China to be somewhat moderate over South China Sea.

All of these had their impacts upon China's strategic behavior in the direction of moderation in East Asia and the Western Pacific even before Donald Trump's election as the U.S. President, including especially that China began soften its posture over South China Sea around the eve of G20 Summit held in September 2016 in Hangzhou, following the "Four Consensus" agreement with Japan reached in November 2014 and the agreement with the United States for preventing clashes between each other's military airplanes and warships reached in late 2015.

Still, Trump's election is a tipping point in the sense that he imposed fear on China, primarily by his countless threatening words against China's trade practices which, if turned into real presidential policy, would severely damage China's economy and finances. His phone call with Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen soon after his election and his tweet statements to shake "One China" policy and make it a bargaining chip were also highly disturbing. China had a strong fear that he was very anti-China, very adventurist, and very Machiavellian. This fear had its policy effect almost immediately: Xi used extraordinary patience and prudence in dealing with Trump, with expressed unquestionable firmness *only* on the core issue of Taiwan and "One China", together with a firm approach of reactive response only, never officially saying bad words in public about

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Trump, while doing China's best in cultivating helpful connections in Washington.

This sort of strategy was seemingly successful. Trump changed overnight to endorse U.S. traditional "One China" policy, which greatly increased Xi's confidence in managing Trump. Moreover, "managing" was reciprocal: Xi gave extraordinary cooperation to Trump on one issue after another, including on the problem of North Korea, and tolerating for a while his extraordinary military rattling against China's principle of "There must be no war" in the Peninsula. More impressive was that President Trump soon brought, somewhat inadvertently, pleasure to China, especially by the surprisingly excellent atmosphere of the Mar-a-Lago Summit with President Xi as well as the lavish compliments from Trump about Xi as a strong, friendly world leader, which has helped further to moderate China's strategic posture.

So, and with other significant reasons, there has been the referred emerging moderation with its nearly comprehensive indications. Strategically speaking, the moderation or retrenchment should be regarded as quite positive for China's longer overall interest for its nature of delaying the Clausewitzian "culminating point of victory."

First, one has to pay intensive attention to the fact that China's behavior toward North Korea's adventurism has become extraordinarily harsh compared to the past, with Beijing taking more actions, more quickly, than previous Chinese leaders had been willing or dared to do. Moreover, one has to not only recognize Xi's extraordinarily moderation over South China Sea but also to see his more active attempts to improve China's relations with ASEAN and its member states (esp. Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia) with their reciprocal efforts, to stabilize maritime situation and increase the Chinese diplomatic influence. And even for a few months from April to July 2017, there were no further statements on the importance of China-Russia strategic partnership and military cooperation, in order to improve the relationship with Washington. There have perhaps been fewer naval activities in the maritime areas near to Japan, with President Xi's

repeated statements since late May 2017 that China hopes to substantially improve relations with Japan, and the emergence of the possible prospect of China-Japan formal summits, which had been suspended for several years. Also impressive was the dramatic improvement in its relations with Singapore, which because of latter's behavior over the South China Sea situation, had dropped to the lowest point in the history since Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew.

Also encouraging, this moderation or retrenchment continued and was reinforced around the Chinese Communist Party's 19th National Congress, which might prove quite significant as to China's general foreign policy in the predictable future. Toward the end of August 2017, almost suddenly both India and China withdrew troops along the strategic border area of Doklam to end (or exactly speaking, to suspend) the months-long military stand-off. China also withdrew bulldozers that were constructing a road on the plateau, which action had brought about India's alleged intrusions in the first place. Moreover, a breakthrough in reducing China-ROK tensions dramatically emerged on October 31, 2017: China, shortly after the end of the 19th Party Congress, de-linked the relationship between the THAAD deployment and the overall China-ROK relations, or in fact abandoned a policy it had insisted on for more than one and half years. China, recognized widely as a would-be superpower, showed itself willing to make a substantial unilateral major concession to a smaller country for overall strategic interests, in a time of historic opportunity provided in a large degree by Trump's "America First" (or as it were Alienating the World) disposition in general: This itself is really enlightening.

As to China's foreign policy orientation after the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, which was claimed by Xi as launching a "new era" for China, one could be sure that there would be "three plus." That means that the following three areas of efforts will be further intensified over the longer term in consideration of what President Xi has been doing since five years ago: (1) Efforts to broaden and deepen China's active involvement in global political economy and global governance, including searching for a leading role in some selective fields, will be greatly reinforced; (2) Efforts to

achieve China's economic and diplomatic predominance in the Asian mainland and even well beyond will be strengthened; and (3) Efforts to establish finally China's strategic superiority over the west part of the Western Pacific (from China's seacoast to the first island chain) will be intensified. In this defining context, the discussed nearly comprehensive moderation would surely continue into the longer future with continued but reduced complexities.

Finally, as to President Trump's "state visit +" to Beijing shortly after the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, one could quote *New York Times'* comment with little reservation that, China's carefulness to meet his vanity (as so many other countries have done) resulted in the lavishing of "Trump's warm words, on a state visit to China replete with ceremony but short of tangible results, showed a president doubling down on his gamble that by cultivating a personal connection with Xi... It was a remarkable moment in the story of China's rise and the United States' response to it, with Trump's performance suggesting a tipping point in great-power politics. By concluding that the United States can better achieve its goals by flattering a Chinese leader, Trump seemed to signal a reversal of roles: The United States may now need China's help more than the other way around. Undoubtedly, President Xi will, with certain limitations, exploit this strategic situation to his best.

*Dr. Shi Yinhong is Professor of International Relations and Director of the Center on American Studies at Renmin University of China in Beijing. He mainly engages in history and ideas of international politics, strategic studies, East Asia security and foreign policies of both China and the United States.*

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