

ASIA PACIFIC

Trump and Xi: Two Imposing Leaders With Clashing Agendas

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By JANE PERLEZ APRIL 5, 2017

BEIJING — When President Xi Jinping of China arrives at President Trump's Florida estate on Thursday, his goal will be to get through the quick visit looking like a resolute leader who can hold his own against the American president, something that even some of Washington's closest allies have failed to pull off.

Mr. Xi wants to show his domestic audience that he can manage the relationship with Mr. Trump and avert a crisis in relations with the United States, a message that would strengthen his hand in the jockeying for power ahead of a Communist Party leadership congress this year.

But while the meetings could lift Mr. Xi's stature at home, they also present significant risks. The two men are at odds on several contentious issues, and perhaps no Chinese leader has ever walked into a meeting with an American president like Mr. Trump, who has shown a disdain for the language of diplomacy. Mr. Xi has a highly scripted style, and the Chinese are accustomed to meetings that are tightly choreographed.

Events began to veer off script on Wednesday as North Korea fired an intermediate range ballistic missile into waters off its east coast, a defiant move that seemed intended to exacerbate differences between Mr. Trump and Mr. Xi.

Mr. Xi is likely to play down potential conflicts, offering vague assurances on trade and North Korea's nuclear provocations that he believes Mr. Trump will want to hear but that may not amount to significant policy changes. At the same time, however, he will not want to look as though he is backing down or being lectured. For the Chinese, the atmospherics of the talks will be as important as the substance.

"How to deal with Trump is a test of statesmanship," said Shi Yinhong, a professor of international relations at Renmin University in Beijing. "Success is very important."

Mr. Trump and Mr. Xi may seem like polar opposites when it comes to temperament, but they are both imposing men with ambitious and at times clashing agendas.

Mr. Xi runs an authoritarian government led by a Communist Party determined to drive China's economy past that of the United States to become the world's biggest. He relies on rigid decorum and a secretive inner sanctum of aides to project power. To squelch dissent in the past few years, he has ordered severe limits on the Chinese people's access to the internet.

Mr. Trump, unpredictable and a neophyte to diplomacy, has pledged to put "America First," in part by stalling China's rise and forcing it to the bargaining table on trade. Twitter is inaccessible in China, but the Chinese are rattled by Mr. Trump's habit of making brash statements on the internet.

Yet Chinese analysts say Mr. Xi enters the meetings, beginning on Thursday afternoon, confident that he can stave off an eruption on the two biggest issues: North Korea and trade.

Mr. Xi is prepared for Mr. Trump to press for more economic punishment against North Korea for its expanding nuclear weapons program and will offer to bear down on the North, an ally of China's, Mr. Shi said.

But, he added, the Chinese leader is expected to cleave to a strategic bottom line: North Korea must serve as a buffer zone against the potential of a unified Korean Peninsula dominated by the American military.

Before Mr. Xi's arrival, Mr. Trump upped the ante, telling The Financial Times last weekend that China had "to help us with North Korea." If Mr. Xi failed to do so, Mr. Trump said, the United States would take unilateral action.

Adding to tensions were signs last week in North Korea of intensified activities at its Punggye-ri underground test site.

The preparations could be for an audacious test to disrupt the talks, experts said. But it was more likely that a test was aimed for April 15, an important national anniversary in North Korea. That timing would also embarrass Mr. Xi just fresh from his Florida meetings.

Mr. Xi appeared to be satisfied he could head off Mr. Trump's campaign threats of calling China a currency manipulator and imposing heavy tariffs on Chinese imports to the United States, Chinese officials said.

If Mr. Trump made these moves, the Chinese state media said, China would be ready with reprisals: ending purchases of grains from the heartland, ordering passenger aircraft from Airbus instead of Boeing and clamping down on the sales of American microchips and phones.

But as the Florida trip has gotten closer, China has become more nervous.

Even on the basic issue of American adherence to the "One China" principle — a longstanding diplomatic policy recognizing Beijing as the sole government of China — Mr. Xi cannot be entirely confident, said Zhang Baohui, professor of international relations at Lingnan University in Hong Kong.

Mr. Trump told Mr. Xi in February that he would respect Beijing as the sole government of China and that the United States did not recognize Taiwan.

But after that phone conversation, Mr. Trump let Mr. Xi know that he owed him one. When the two sides issued separate statements, the White House version noted that Mr. Trump had agreed to the policy "at the request" of Mr. Xi.

In a telling difference, the Chinese version omitted that Mr. Xi had made the request.

“‘One China’ is not necessarily a done deal,” Mr. Zhang said. “The question is: Can you trust Trump? ‘One China’ is never settled, and he knows bargaining better than anyone.”

Top Chinese officials have been closely gauging Mr. Trump’s domestic fortunes as a barometer of the president’s mood when the talks open.

By their calculation Mr. Trump’s poor poll ratings, the investigations into his campaign’s connections with Russia and the failure of his health care legislation are not necessarily beneficial for Mr. Xi.

On the eve of the scheduled vote on the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, an American economist, Eswar Prasad, said he dropped in on Chinese colleagues who were gaming out Mr. Xi’s economic proposals for Florida.

Mr. Prasad said he was surprised to find that the Chinese economists were obsessed with tracking Mr. Trump’s fortunes in the congressional vote. For example, they knew exactly how many votes the Freedom Caucus had mustered, he said.

“They were saying they wanted the vote to go Trump’s way because then Trump would be less tempted to take it out on China,” said Mr. Prasad, an economist at Cornell. Mr. Trump suffered a big legislative defeat, the opposite of what they hoped for.

Then Mr. Trump predicted in a Twitter post late last week that the meeting would be “a very difficult one in that we can no longer have massive trade deficits and job losses.”

To address the administration’s complaints blaming the trade imbalance with China for the loss of American jobs, Mr. Xi is likely to offer Chinese investments in American infrastructure and plants, Chinese analysts said.

But plans for such an announcement are not clear, and whether they will satisfy the hard-line wing of Mr. Trump’s economic team is an open question. Further, the analysts said, Mr. Xi did not want to appear too deferential to Mr. Trump.

“Beijing’s hope of using the Trump-Xi tête-à-tête to smooth the bilateral economic relationship,” Mr. Prasad said, “has been complicated by the uncertainties generated by Trump’s hostile Twitter posts and the mixed signals emanating from different parts of the administration.”

Before Mr. Xi’s departure, China’s Foreign Ministry was preparing for all possibilities — fretting over camera angles for the retinue of state-run media that will beam back images of him with Mr. Trump in balmy climes, and whether he would be comfortable staying at a hotel slightly less opulent than Mr. Trump’s lavish Mar-a-Lago.

Most of all, they were worried about how the two men would get along.

“Both leaders have strong characters,” said one Chinese official involved in the planning who requested anonymity per diplomatic practice.

Perhaps at the back of his mind was the fact that Mr. Xi and President Barack Obama met many times, starting with a similarly planned informal visit in 2013 at Sunnylands, a sumptuous estate in Southern California.

“After that, the relationship only got grimmer and grimmer,” Mr. Shi said.

Follow Jane Perlez on Twitter @JanePerlez.

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