

Trump's frosty phone call with Chinese President Xi

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A phone call by US President Trump to his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping Sunday night (US time) confirms a marked deterioration of relations since their summit at Mar-a-Lago in Florida during April. Trump sought again to pressure China to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programs, but came away with little to show.

A terse readout from the phone call issued by the White House said Trump raised the “growing threat” posed by North Korea, adding only that the two leaders reaffirmed their pro-forma commitment to “a denuclearised Korean Peninsula.” Trump is demanding that China impose crippling sanctions on North Korea and threatening to take military action that could lead to a major war on Beijing’s doorstep.

Citing senior administration officials, the *New York Times* yesterday reported that Trump had warned Xi that the US was prepared to act on its own if China failed to compel North Korea to submit.

The official readout said Trump also “reiterated his determination to seek more balanced trade relations with America’s trading partners”—an implicit threat to press ahead with trade war measures against China.

After his April meeting with Xi, Trump toned down his inflammatory anti-China rhetoric and suggested he would offer economic concessions to China if it reined in North Korea. Late last month, Trump signalled a shift, declaring in a tweet that Chinese efforts to force North Korea into line had “not worked out.”

Trump intensified the pressure on China by making a phone call earlier on Sunday to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The two leaders spoke of “the growing threat from North Korea,” declared their support for “increasing pressure on the regime” and reaffirmed the US-Japan military alliance. Abe has exploited the alleged threat posed by Pyongyang to

accelerate Japanese remilitarisation, which is aimed not only against North Korea, but also China.

China’s state-owned media pointed to the tensions evident during Xi’s phone call with Trump. The Chinese president reportedly expressed his concern that relations had been affected by “negative factors” since the April meeting and urged Trump to uphold the “consensus we reached at Mar-a-Lago.”

While the reports did not elaborate on these factors, Xi evidently stressed that China attached “great importance to the US government’s reaffirmation of the One China policy” and hoped the US would “properly handle the Taiwan problem by adhering to the One China principle.” For nearly four decades, the US has recognised Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

The Trump administration intentionally inflamed relations with China when it gave the green light last week for a major \$1.4 billion arms sale to Taiwan. Previous US administrations have sold arms to Taiwan supposedly to ensure against a Chinese attack. However, the latest arms deal struck a particularly raw nerve in Beijing as Trump had called the One China policy into question last December. He withdrew the threat before meeting Xi in April but questions remain in China about his commitment to a policy that has been fundamental to US-China relations.

Beijing was given another cause for concern after the Senate Armed Services Committee approved a change in US policy toward Taiwan, to authorise regular visits by US warships to Taiwanese ports and allow Taiwanese naval vessels to visit US bases in the Pacific. If the US Congress approves the measure in the National Defence Authorisation Act, it would significantly boost US-Taiwanese military relations. The legislation also calls for the US to develop

Taiwan's "undersea warfare capabilities" and strengthen strategic cooperation with Taiwan.

As well as the Taiwanese arms deal, Xi's "negative factors" clearly refer to other recent provocative moves by the Trump administration, economic as well as military:

* Last week, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin announced sanctions on two Chinese entities—the Bank of Dandong and Dalian Global Unity Shipping—as well as two Chinese business executives for their allegedly illicit business dealings with North Korea. US citizens and businesses will be prohibited from doing business with those companies and individuals.

* On Sunday, the US navy conducted its second so-called freedom of navigation operation in less than six weeks to challenge Chinese sovereignty in the South China Sea. The guided-missile destroyer USS Stethem intruded within the 12-nautical mile territorial limit claimed by China around Triton Island in the Paracel island group. The Chinese foreign ministry branded the US foray "a serious political and military provocation" and reported that Chinese warships and fighter planes were sent to warn off the US destroyer.

* Trump's expressed determination to have "more balanced trade relations" with China and other major trading partners has taken concrete form in the threat of US sanctions against foreign steel. The Department of Commerce has conducted an investigation into whether steel imports constitute a threat to "national security"—a pretext that Trump could exploit under little-used legislation to impose penalties. The threat is particularly infuriating to Beijing, which has just completed lifting its ban on US beef imports into China.

The Trump administration is rapidly adopting a more confrontational stance toward China across the board. At present, Trump appears to be using the threats as a lever to pressure Beijing to take tougher measures against Pyongyang. The Chinese government, however, is reluctant to impose further sanctions against North Korea that could provoke the collapse of the regime and provide an opening for the US and its allies to exploit.

Trump and Xi did reaffirm in their phone call that they would meet on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Germany later this week. Any agreement over North Korea, however, appears unlikely as Chinese officials

have repeatedly urged the US to do more to ease tensions and pave the way for talks to defuse the standoff. The Trump administration has ruled out negotiations with North Korea except under the "right circumstances"—in other words, only if Pyongyang caves in to US demands.

After North Korea tested another intermediate range missile this morning, Trump again lashed out at Beijing in a tweet, saying: "Perhaps China will put a heavy move on North Korea and end this nonsense once and for all!"

If sanctions fail to bring Pyongyang to heel, the US has threatened to use "all options," including the military one. The Pentagon has carried out a massive military build-up in North East Asia and developed plans to attack North Korea, which would trigger a catastrophic conflict that could draw in other major powers, including China and Russia.



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