

## Decoding Trump-ism

By Bunn Nagara



*Getting along: Compared to other countries, the United States and China have more to talk about. Xi and Trump could discuss a range of issues, from economics to diplomacy to security. — Reuters*

LAST Wednesday, a US Navy spy plane and its Chinese counterpart each tempted fate, flying within 300m of each other over the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

Both were quad-prop surveillance aircraft on airborne patrol. The near-miss, the first this year after two incidents last year, showed the high-risk “great game” of the two major powers in this region.

US-China relations were already strained after President Donald Trump questioned Washington’s One China policy and wanted China to quit the disputed islands it already occupies.

There was also speculation on a “trade war”. An aerial collision between their military aircraft over disputed territory would have sharpened prospects of conflict.

Within hours, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson persuaded Trump to go easy on China rather than flirt with reviewing the One China policy.

The result: a long and “very cordial” phone conversation between presidents Trump and Xi Jinping, the first after Trump’s inauguration and the second since his election.

Warm mutual greetings were exchanged with mutual invitations to visit each other’s country.

Trump had his moment as the master of brinkmanship. Now it is Xi’s turn to shine, if he does, as a master strategist – if he is one.

China's chances here are uncertain. It has been slow and flat-footed in the diplomatic stakes with Washington so far.

In contrast, Japan and Israel moved quickly to engage Trump early. When it did not seem clear if Trump would favour Japan or Israel in any way, their leaders sought to engage him first.

Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Benjamin Netanyahu correctly read Trump, when reasonably managed, as a highly impressionable person with very impressionistic views. Whoever engages him first gets a head start in good relations.

Now Trump may be better disposed to Japan and Israel than he might otherwise have been. Diplomatic engagements are basically a political investment.

But the media focus on US-China ties has obscured the poor state of US-Japan relations. Abe needs to invest in the Trump presidency.

Trump had swiftly dumped the TPP that Japan was counting on. He has also accused Japan of suppressing the value of the yen and not paying enough for its own defence, while threatening Toyota with high taxes on vehicles from new Mexican plants rather than US ones.

Japanese manufacturers, including Toyota, then pledged more production, and jobs, at US plants. Abe may also want to "position" Japan favourably over China in strategic terms to Trump.

Last September, Netanyahu met Trump and Hillary Clinton separately in New York. He reportedly spent a long 90 minutes at Trump Tower.

When Trump received flak for wanting a wall on the border with Mexico, Netanyahu signalled approval by referencing his own fence projects on the borders with Egypt and Palestine. Trump duly reciprocated.

Now Israel's barrier builder, Magal Security Systems, wants to build Trump's wall with Mexico. Beyond just a business deal, it would be a political investment to cement Israel's controversial schemes.

Israel's right-wing now wants Netanyahu to drop the two-state solution altogether. But Netanyahu will not have it easy, since just days before his arrival, Trump openly opposed his settlements policy.

In September, candidate Trump used the meeting to project his image as a prospective world leader. Now Netanyahu is using Friday's meeting with President Trump to draw dividends as Israel receives flak for illegal settlements in Palestine.

Yet, compared to other countries, the US and China have more to talk about: from economics to diplomacy to security. As two hulking, intertwined economies, and as permanent members of the UN Security Council, their range of interests and concerns is global.

Enter the low-profile second track diplomacy China has been pursuing with the US since late last year. This is led by State Councillor Yang Jiechi, an ambassador to the US before serving as Foreign Minister when Secretary of State Clinton announced the US "pivot" to Asia.

An alumnus of the London School of Economics, Yang is fluent in English and understands the US better than his contemporaries in Beijing. He is often described as China's "top diplomat" who outranks Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

This second track is vital and befits "ChinAmerica", ties between the two major powers that make for the world's most important bilateral relations today.

However, how far Xi or Beijing ultimately listens to Yang remains to be seen. A lacklustre first track diplomacy remains very much in evidence.

The hesitancy and passivity of Track One, notwithstanding standard shrill reactions to issues like Taiwan, seem to be a timid international response to the Trump era.

There are vocal Trump opponents, there are visible Trump supporters, and there are others like China gingerly treading water and keeping their distance. But there are also others like Japan and Israel who seize the moment without hesitation.

Much of the hesitancy seems to be caused by internal US politics rejecting someone who is wilfully politically incorrect. This sense is consistently projected by Western mainstream media, as if the issues they cover are necessarily universal.

They include Trump's decision to scrap Obamacare, state-sponsored abortions and special toilets for transgender people. Given the extreme views at both ends, the middle way Trump prefers begins to look like moderation.

Meanwhile, an opposition-fuelled media has been tweaking news about Trump policies in an unfavourable light, carrying negative emotions with it.

Case in point: travel restrictions into the US, pending new measures to screen out potential terrorists. What Christiane Amanpour on CNN and some others call a "Muslim ban" is nothing of the kind.

The restrictions comprise three components suspending entry regardless of race and religion: by all refugees for four months, by Syrian passport holders indefinitely, and by passport holders of six other countries for three months.

If the restrictions are defined as a Muslim ban, they have to be definitively a ban on Muslims which they are not. Protesters argue that since the seven are Muslim-majority countries, there is a Muslim ban.

But if a majority count determines definition, then since the majority of the world's 49 Muslim-majority countries (2010 data) are unaffected, there is no Muslim ban. How effective such restrictions can be in keeping out potential terrorists is another matter.

Protesters forget that Barack Obama had earlier listed these seven countries as being "of concern". Trump only used the list for restrictions for a limited period.

The US has had several immigrant and citizenship restrictions going back a century. Some of these came together in the Immigration and Nationality Act (1952), parts of which remain today.

These restrictions survived Republican and Democratic administrations alike. Yet they were not controversial before, or the media did not make them appear so controversial.

A real concern, however, is Trump's intention to scrap the Iran nuclear deal. He and his advisers fail to realise that it is more than a nuclear deal, being also a face-saving measure for all eight signatories, including Iran.

Nobody can know if Iran ever wants to develop nuclear weapons. The only possible agreement is the present deal that puts any such plan on hold.

Undoing the deal will open a can of worms, starting with emboldening Iran's hardliners over its moderates. Learning superpower politics on the job can be so hazardous.

***Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.***