



Vice President Mike Pence speaks at the Hudson Institute in Washington, Oct. 4, 2018 (AP photo by Jacquelyn Martin).

In Standoff With China, Trump Opts for Platitudes Over Policy

Judah Grunstein | Wednesday, Oct. 10, 2018

In a speech (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/>) last week that seemed as much an effort to catch up to recent events as a formal declaration of policy, Vice President Mike Pence put Beijing on notice that “the United States of America has adopted a new approach to China.”

The address, delivered at the Hudson Institute think tank in Washington, for the most part covered familiar ground in terms of American grievances with the bilateral relationship. Having spent the past 20 years seeking to invite China into the international order as a “responsible stakeholder,” the U.S. has now run out of patience over Beijing’s unfair trade practices, domestic repression and assertive militarization of the South China Sea. Perhaps scrambling to lend weight to President Donald Trump’s recent charge of Chinese interference in America’s midterm congressional elections, Pence also added a new item to the list: “a whole-of-government approach, using political, economic and military tools, as well as propaganda,” that China is deploying “to advance its influence and benefit its interests in the United States.”

Whether as a candidate or president, Trump’s China policy has confounded observers, as it has

lurched chaotically from provocation to engagement and back again. During the 2016 campaign, he vilified China for devaluing the yuan—although Beijing had already allowed its currency to rise—and for the bilateral trade imbalance. During the transition, he outraged Beijing by taking a congratulatory call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and questioning the sanctity of the "one China" policy. He later appointed noted China hawk Peter Navarro to his inner circle of trade advisers and threatened retaliatory tariffs.

Yet in his first face-to-face meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in April 2017, Trump seemed smitten, parroting Xi's stance on the Korean Peninsula and calling the Chinese leader his new friend. The impression was only reinforced during Trump's subsequent state visit to China, when Xi pulled out all the stops to flatter Trump's ego. The courtship seemed to pay off when it came to dealing with North Korea's nuclear program, as China agreed to tighten sanctions on the North as part of Trump's high-stakes "maximum pressure" campaign to bring Pyongyang to the negotiating table.

But any hopes have long since faded that this early honeymoon period might forestall Trump's campaign promise to get tough on China over trade. A series of tit-for-tat tariffs initiated by Trump now have observers referring to the U.S.-China trade war. And just last week, a near-collision in the South China Sea between a U.S. Navy vessel conducting a freedom-of-navigation patrol and a Chinese navy ship that aggressively cut across its course was a reminder that an actual war is a real risk, however remote.

At the same time, the administration's muddled approach to the trade war left many observers—and also, reportedly, policymakers in Beijing—confused as to the ultimate objectives of Trump's China policy. Was the goal just to reduce the trade deficit? Address China's long list of unfair trade practices? Push back against the militarization of the South China Sea? All of the above?

The ad hoc measures, combined with the cacophony coming from within the Trump administration during trade negotiations, made answering these questions difficult. Pence's speech seemed to be a first attempt at rationalizing the disparate grievances into a coherent policy line.

Trump's iconoclastic approach might incentivize the Chinese leadership to seek an off-ramp to the current standoff.

Inasmuch as it recapitulated the many ways that China has taken advantage of the international order, particularly on trade, to increase its wealth, power and influence, without moderating its behavior at home, Pence's speech largely articulated what has become a consensus position

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/23450/to-decipher-china-s-party-congress-look-to-what-we-already-know-about-xi>)

among China watchers. While he presented a one-sided assessment of China's international behavior, including its influence operations within the U.S., the grievances are real and have been of growing concern (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/24266/it-s-time-for-the-u-s-to-rethink-its-assumptions-about-china>) since at least the tail end of the Obama administration. The conventional wisdom in Washington during the 2016 campaign was that President Barack Obama's successor would have to take a more forceful stance with China on all these issues.

When it moved from a backward glance to a preview of what's ahead, however, Pence's speech—and by extension the entire administration—confused platitudes for policy. Echoing language that first appeared in a series of Defense Department reports (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/24140/the-shortsighted-national-defense-strategy-repudiates-obama-but-also-trump>) last year, and which resurfaced recently (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/30/world/asia/china-us-security-mattis.html>) in a speech by a senior administration official at a Chinese Embassy function in Washington, Pence summed up the new U.S. approach as “great-power competition.” To that end, the U.S. will marshal its economic and military power and leverage its alliances in pursuit of a “free, fair and reciprocal” trade relationship with China. If the prize of this competition is leadership of the 21st-century global economy, Pence suggested, the contest must take place on an even playing field.

It's hard to take issue with such a statement in principle. But it's also hard to achieve it in practice, particularly at this stage of China's rise and America's relative decline. The Trump administration's trade war and more muscular approach to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea simply enshrine China's worst fear and frequent accusation—that the U.S. is seeking to contain its rise—as official U.S. policy. Pence took pains to add that “competition does not always mean hostility.” But if Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's reception in China (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-tells-trump-administration-to-stop-its-misguided-actions-and-allegations/2018/10/08/cd17c926-cac1-11e8-a85c-0bbe30c19e8f_story.html) this weekend is any indication, that bromide didn't go over very well in Beijing.

Moreover, it is reductionist to dismiss the previous status quo as a total failure. The U.S. made more room for China in multilateral institutions to assuage fears of containment, while nudging and cajoling the Chinese leadership into assuming a more responsible role in global governance and trade practices. From North Korea to the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate change agreement, the U.S. succeeded in getting China to sign on to key issues (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/18254/obama-and-the-u-s-unbound-the-potential-for-a-transformational-legacy>) where its cooperation and support were essential. It is unlikely Beijing's buy-in would have been forthcoming in a state of open

confrontation, a lesson the Trump administration might be setting itself up to learn now.

At the same time, although the status quo did deliver some notable successes, its failures—as identified by Pence but also others before him—were stubbornly persistent. To the extent that Trump has left the Chinese leadership off-balance and kept Beijing out of its comfort zone, it is a role-reversal compared to the last two incoming U.S. administrations. His iconoclastic approach and the suggestion that he just might be crazy enough to pull the pin on the grenade, rather than back down, might incentivize the Chinese leadership to seek an off-ramp to the current standoff.

If not, however, the kind of great-power competition that Pence and the Pentagon are describing historically leads to conflicts with heavy costs. As I argued in last week's WPR podcast (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/podcast/26277/violence-in-cameroon-s-anglophone-region-tests-biya-s-trump-card-stability>), this confrontation comes too early for China, which has not yet risen to its full potential strength, and too late for the U.S., whose unipolar moment has passed even if it still enjoys superior economic and military power. But it is also a confrontation that neither side can afford to back down from.

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