



Trump: The view from China

What do Chinese media and commentators make of Trump? This ACRI survey goes beyond the English-language *Global Times* to look at a range of Chinese sources. The overwhelming impression: restraint.

'One China' policy

Chinese state media has welcomed US President Donald Trump's phone call with President Xi Jinping on February 9, in which he agreed to honour the One China policy, reversing his previous position that 'everything is under negotiation including One China'.¹

For the *People's Daily* (人民日报) the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) official newspaper, China Institute of International Studies (中国国际问题研究院, CIIS) Distinguished Research Fellow Jia Xiudong wrote that Trump's February 8 letter to President Xi 'reinforced the importance of US-China relations'. However, Jia cautioned that actions speak louder than words, and words can be ambiguous. Both sides need to work on specific bilateral, regional and global issues. Jia concluded 'there is a Chinese saying, 'good food is worth waiting for'. I hope that this interaction will be the start of a 'breaking in' period of benign US-China relations'.²

A February 11 *People's Daily* editorial also highlighted what it called the 'three key words' of the Trump-Xi call: One China, partnership

and cooperation. 'At the highest level of interaction between China and the US, Trump personally emphasised the US Government's commitment to the One China policy, and this should be praised'.

It also said, 'If from now on Trump looks at China and the US-China relationship from the perspective of partnership, the direction of bilateral relations will be positive'.³

The *Nanfang Daily* (南方日报) the official paper of the Guangdong Provincial Committee of the CCP, wrote on February 11 that 'Trump's return to American government support for implementing the One China policy will inevitably play a positive role in stabilising US-China relations'.⁴

Current affairs commentator He Liangliang remarked on his weekly *Phoenix Television* show 'Viewpoint' (时事亮亮点) on February 13 that Trump's reaffirmation of the One China policy shows that he 'has set upon a realist path; if US-China relations are handled with a realist attitude, even if there is some friction or differences between the two countries, in the end, the relationship will remain stable and won't break down because of a few fights'.⁵

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¹ Peter Nicholas et al, 'Trump Sets Bar for China, Russia – President-elect to keep Moscow sanctions for now, won't commit to longtime Taiwan deal', *The Wall Street Journal*, January 14 2017.

² Jia Xiudong [贾秀东], 'Trump's letter is meaningless' [特朗普的来信别有意味], *People's Daily*, February 13 2017 <<http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0210/c1002-29070624.html>>.

³ 'The three key words of the US-China leaders' phone call' [中美元首通话的三个关键词], *People's Daily*, February 11 2017 <http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2017-02/11/content_1749098.htm>.

⁴ 'The One China principle is the cornerstone of US-China relations' [一个中国原则是中美关系的基石], *Nanfang Daily*, February 11 2017 <http://www.southcn.com/nfdaily/nis-soft/wwwroot/site1/nfrb/html/2017-02/11/content_7617135.htm>.

⁵ 'Was Trump's call a 'surrender'? Revealing the reasons behind the softening of his attitude toward China' [特朗普打电话来“投降”？强硬对华态度突然软化原因曝光], *Viewpoint*, February 13 2017 <http://phtv.ifeng.com/a/20170214/44542929_0_shimi>.

The Hong Kong-based satellite television station has coverage across China and internationally, with an audience reach of over 300 million.

South China Sea

The Paper (澎湃) a state-funded online newspaper established in 2014, noted conflicting messages coming from Washington. On the one hand, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated at his confirmation hearing that the US could attempt to block China's access to islands and reefs. However, Secretary of Defense James Mattis said during his visit to Japan that the South China Sea issue requires a diplomatic solution.

Interestingly, *The Paper* also quoted Angus Houston, former Australian defence force chief and now visiting fellow of the Australian National University's National Security College, saying 'it is too late to stop the China program in the South China Sea'. The report emphasised that China does not want conflict with the US.⁶

The national Chinese-language *China Daily* (中国日报) online edition on February 13 repeated statements by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Geng Shuang: 'We urge the US not to take any actions that challenge China's sovereignty and security'.⁷

The People's Liberation Army's online news portal, *China Military Net* (中国军网) reported on February 16 that the South China Sea Fleet conducted long-distance supply replenishment training in unspecified waters in the South China Sea. It did not indicate this was a response to talk of potential US freedom of navigation operations.⁸

Regional diplomacy

Commentators in China acknowledge that Trump's presidency marks a significant change

to previously accepted diplomatic traditions and norms.

In an article in the *Financial Times Chinese* (FT 中文) on February 14, Zhang Feng, a lecturer at the National Institute for South China Sea Studies wrote, 'In the American historical context, Trump diplomacy is revolutionary, an overturning of diplomatic traditions upheld by both the Republican and Democratic parties since the Second World War'.

Zhang went on to argue that Trump's anti-globalisation presents China with a unique opportunity to improve its relationships in the Asia-Pacific region. 'As soon as neighbouring countries believe China is a principled, more reliable partner, they will not be able to support Trump's transactional and tough stance toward China.' In a frank admission of the limits of China's ambitions, Zhang added that improved Chinese engagement with the region does not mean replacing the US or 'forcing regional countries to make a choice between China and the US', but rather working together with other stakeholders to achieve a better future for the Asia-Pacific as a whole. It is worth noting that China's Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi expressed this policy in his joint press conference with Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop at Parliament House on February 7. Wang said Australia's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China could 'enable the two countries to make greater contribution to share the benefits and the common prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region'.⁹

In a candid reflection on the combustibility of the North Korean nuclear issue, Zhang remarked, 'Of the four issues Trump has used to threaten China [trade war, South China Sea blockade, One China policy and North Korea], North Korea is the real challenge. If the North Korean nuclear issue is not handled correctly, it could cause another outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula, or lead to Japan and South Korea's development of nuclear weapons... [which would] not be in China's interest'.¹⁰

⁶ Yang Yifan [杨一帆], 'US media: The US Navy at the highest level is contemplating new provocation plans in the South China Sea, or sending aircraft carriers' [美媒: 美国海军高层酝酿南海新挑衅计划, 或派遣航母试探], *The Paper*, February 13 2017 <http://www.thepaper.cn/www/v3/isp/newsDetail_forward_1617881>.

⁷ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs: We resolutely oppose the US and Japan's rhetoric on the Diaoyu Islands and South China Sea [中国外交部: 坚决反对日美涉钓鱼岛和南海问题言论], February 13 2017, <http://news.chinadaily.com.cn/2017-02/13/content_28187252.htm>.

⁸ South China Sea fleet conducts first comprehensive long-distance supply drills in South China Sea territory [南海舰队远海训练编队在南海某海域首次综合补给], *China Military Net*, February 16 2017 <http://www.81.cn/sydt/2017-02/17/content_7490557.htm>.

⁹ Julie Bishop, 'Australia-China Foreign and Strategic Dialogue - joint press conference with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi', February 7 2017 <http://foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/Pages/2017/ib_tr_170207.aspx?w=tb1CaGpkPX%2FIS0K%2BqZKEq%3D%3D%27>.

¹⁰ Zhang Feng [张锋], 'Trump's diplomatic transformations and China's regional diplomatic choices' [特朗普的外交变革与中国周边外交抉择], *Financial Times Chinese*, February 14 2017 <<http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001071355>>.

On February 14 the *People's Daily* covered a lecture presented by Nanjing University's Professor Zhu Feng at Renmin University in Beijing, a university initially established to train Communist Party bureaucrats. Zhu, a renowned scholar of international relations and Chinese foreign policy said, 'Don't forget, Trump's Secretary of Defense James Mattis chose Japan and South Korea for his first official overseas visit. The first calls Secretary of State Tillerson made were to Japan and South Korea...the core of the Trump administration's global strategy is still the Asia-Pacific'.¹¹

Trade

Analysing the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Su Xiaohui, an academic at the China Institute of International Studies wrote, 'Observing the tension between the US and Japan over the TPP, China is even more committed to participating and promoting the process of economic integration of the Asia Pacific region'.¹²

The Centre for China and Globalisation (中国与全球化智库, CCG), which ranks in the top 10 Chinese think tanks,¹³ published a report on January 20 entitled 'Trump's Coming Era: Challenges, Opportunities and Policy Responses'. The report recognised the potential challenges posed by Trump's 'America First' approach, but identified eight possible areas of enhanced cooperation between the US and China. For example, 'China has a unique competitiveness in building infrastructure. Trump's infrastructure construction plan might become the new highlight of U.S.-China cooperation'. The report also proposes 10 policy recommendations.¹⁴

The *Global Times* (环球时报) Chinese edition, a subsidiary of the *People's Daily*, quoted CCG researcher He Ning saying that 'the continuing rise of trade [between the US and China] is a result of both countries' mutual interests, not China's unilateral good work or the US' unilateral good work'.¹⁵

Following the meeting between Rex Tillerson and Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Bonn on February 17, the *Global Times* wrote, 'Tillerson indicated that only friendship could define the US-China relationship' and quoted Associate Dean of Renmin University's School of International Studies Jin Canrong, 'There are still many uncertainties in the US-China relationship, but this meeting brought some certainty, which is a good thing'.¹⁶

The English-language *Global Times* also ran an editorial about the meeting on February 18, stating '[t]he meeting sends a positive signal about Sino-US relations, consolidating ties following [the] earlier phone call' between Trump and Xi. Furthermore, 'the alarm set off by the phone call between Trump and Taiwan leader Tsai Ing-wen seems to have subsided by now'. However, at the same time Trump's 'war with mainstream media makes it difficult for [him] to ally with the media on an ideological front against China'.¹⁷

Bellicose *Global Times* headlines have tended to attract foreign media attention, but even this publication known for its nationalist commentary has emphasised restraint.

¹¹It is doubtful that voices of opposition will affect Trump's ruling position' [质疑反对声浪难以影响特朗普执政地位], *People's Daily*, February 15 2017 <<http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0215/c1002-29081022.html>>.

¹²Su Xiaohui [苏晓晖], 'We should say goodbye to the TPP' [该跟 TPP 说再见了], *China Institute of International Studies*, January 25 2017 <http://www.cjis.org.cn/chinese/2017-01/25/content_9312845.htm>.

¹³James G McGann, '2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report', January 26 2017, *University of Pennsylvania* <http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=think_tanks>.

¹⁴Trump's Coming Era: Challenges, Opportunities and Policy Responses' [特朗普时代: 挑战、机遇与中国应对], *Centre for China and Globalisation*, January 2017 <<http://www.ccg.org.cn/dianzizaizhi/trump2017.pdf>>.

¹⁵'US-China relations: New opportunities lie in resolving challenges' [中美新关系: 化解挑战为新机], *Global Times*, February 13 2017 <<http://world.huanqiu.com/2017-02/10117841.html>>.

¹⁶'Tillerson positively assesses US-China relations, says only friendship can define relationship' [蒂勒森积极评价中美关系 称定义美中关系的只能是友好], *Global Times*, February 18 2017 <<http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2017-02/10155043.html>>.

¹⁷'Wang, Tillerson meet adds certainties to ties', *Global Times*, February 18 2017 <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1033597.shtml>>.