

US renews pressure on China with an eye on North Korea threat

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Washington: Less than three months after President Donald Trump and China's leader strolled the manicured lawns at Mar-a-Lago, the White House is suddenly engaged in a multipronged pressure campaign against Beijing, born of frustration with the limited results of their much-touted cooperation on ending North Korea's nuclear threat.

File pic - Trump and Jinping walk together after their meetings in Palm Beach

Delivering a one-two punch to China on Thursday, the Trump administration approved a \$1.4 billion arms sale to Taiwan and blacklisted a small Chinese bank over its business ties with North Korea. The State Department earlier in the week gave Beijing a dismal grade in a new human trafficking report that was endorsed by Ivanka Trump, the president's daughter and senior adviser.

The actions culminated days of increased irritation among the president and his top aides over China's reluctance to tighten the economic screws on Pyongyang. Until recently, American officials had been hailing the improved coordination with China and describing it as the centerpiece of their strategy for preventing North Korea's isolated totalitarian government from being able to strike the U.S. homeland with nuclear weapons.

Trump hinted at his loss of patience last week, tweeting that his bid to secure a tougher Chinese approach "has not worked out." China represents about 90 percent of North Korea's trade. After a meeting Friday with South Korean President Moon Jae-in that focused heavily on North Korea, Trump made no reference to Beijing.

The shifts in Trump's China policy in some way reflect the natural ebbs and flows that are to be expected in great power relations. The U.S. and China have the world's two biggest economies, with all the commercial opportunities and headaches such a dynamic entails. While America's military is by far the strongest, the gap with China is rapidly narrowing. On security, diplomacy, foreign investment and other matters, it's only natural that U.S. and Chinese interests will collide.

But Trump's rapid flip-flops on China are a departure from the practice of past U.S. presidents, who found persistent behind-the-scenes pressure and engagement of Beijing more likely than headline-grabbing confrontations to produce deals on everything from carbon emissions to currency exchange rates.

Trump was blisteringly critical of China as a candidate, saying he would not allow the Chinese "to rape our country." He also fielded a call from Taiwan's president weeks after his election victory. Trump's tone drastically shifted in the run-up to the summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Florida. He toned down threats to upend the U.S. "One China" policy, which acknowledges Beijing's claim to Taiwan. And he said China doesn't manipulate its currency.

Amid the unpredictability, China's government has relied heavily on a close relationship that has developed between its U.S. ambassador, Cui Tiankai, and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser. Kushner, who is heavily involved in foreign policy, speaks frequently with the ambassador.

"I think that channel has not provided them with the correct understanding with what they need to do on a range of issues," said Bonnie Glaser, a senior adviser for Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "On North Korea, they just didn't hit the mark."

The White House insisted that its actions this week were not aimed at punishing China for its reluctance to ramp up pressure on North Korea. The State Department said the arms sale to Taiwan was approved under a long-standing U.S. policy to help the self-governing island's self-defense. Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, who announced the sanctions on the Chinese bank, said that "we are in no way targeting China."

But officials, particularly at the White House, have voiced increased exasperation in recent days.

Dennis Wilder, who spent four years as President George W. Bush's top East Asia adviser and six years as senior editor of President Barack Obama's daily intelligence briefing, pointed to what he heard was a disappointing U.S.-China security dialogue last week in Washington. Instead of engaging in an open back-and-forth on North Korea strategy, he said, Chinese officials including foreign policy chief Yang Jiechi presented Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis with well-recited policy positions.

"The Trump administration was looking for a candid dialogue, not talking points," said Wilder, now a Georgetown University professor, adding that Mattis and Tillerson left with the impression that China was "every reluctant" to take on its banks doing illicit business with North Korea. "The body language was clear: China is still not willing to see North Korea as a strategic problem."

Briefing foreign policy experts this week on China and other matters, a senior U.S. official noted that Tillerson has raised the problem of North Korea and China in every one of his meetings with top foreign diplomats. The U.S. has made clear to China that Chinese banks and companies conducting business with Pyongyang will face sanctions, if there is no movement on North Korea's nuclear activities, said the official, according to a participant in the meeting. The individual was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter and asked that his name and that of the senior official be withheld.

The Trump administration may not have harbored lofty expectations for its diplomacy with Beijing. Several administrations have wearied with diplomatic efforts to change China's thinking on everything from environmental and economic policy to stopping a North Korean nuclear program that will soon be able to threaten America's West Coast.

For Trump, the desire for a quick breakthrough runs head-on into China's focus on long-term objectives. As frustrating a partner as Pyongyang has been for the Chinese, experts see Beijing still preferring Kim Jong Un's totalitarian regime over a unified Korean peninsula on its border, solidified by a U.S. alliance. Trump and Xi's personal bond, however strong, is unlikely to change such thinking.

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