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How the Xi-Trump summit can rebuild Sino-US trust and bring stability to the Korean peninsula

Tom Plate says erosion of mutual trust is the biggest obstacle to China and America jointly reducing tensions in East Asia, but the Florida summit offers their leaders a chance for change

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In the second term of Bill Clinton's presidency, and the reign of Jiang Zemin (江澤民) and Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基), when both sides put economic engagement over geopolitical jiu-jitsu, overall trust levels between the US and Chinese governments seemed to be on an uptick. When China entered the World Trade Organisation – in 2001, just months into the George W. Bush administration – the Clintonites had reason to feel they had made a bit of history. Bilateral ties seemed to be heading in a pragmatic direction. There was, between the two, a quantum of solace.

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Some degree of trust is essential if the relationship is not to become dysfunctional. In western social science, the power of transactional trust is seen as central to social stability and economic efficiency. The very routine of habitually working together well can create its own positivity, a sort of social currency or bonus human capital. Clinton's ace trade negotiator, Charlene Barshefsky, developed a close relationship with the exceptional Zhu, then China's premier,

and she would fly to Beijing at his invitation to offer officials briefings on WTO intricacies. A bilateral bitcoin almost seemed in the minting.



These days, one key impediment in the all-important Sino-US relationship is the relative waning of mutual trust. After the US-ignited global meltdown of 2008-2009, Chinese reverence for the macro-economic wisdom, and probity, of Wall Street/Washington evaporated. And ever since the rise of President Xi Jinping (习近平) and his pushy Pacific policy in the South China Sea, America's take on Beijing went from a little trust to lots of verify. Today, the bilateral bitcoin is battered.

Consider the divergence of viewpoints about the hot-headed, hot-wired and nuclearised North Korea. America's current policy thrust, says Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅), is nothing less than a "freight train" careering toward calamity. How alarmist? In Seoul , US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson issued threats: [the military option is "on the table"](#); the US policy of "strategic patience" is history.

This was backed by his boss, who in a March 17 tweet trumpeted: "North Korea is behaving very badly. They have been 'playing' the United States for years. China has done little to help!" This is high school international relations.

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Watch out: the Donald Trump administration might bluster into a 21st-century equivalent of the Cuban missile crisis. Beijing (and others across Asia) make a fair point when they wonder aloud why the US could live for decades with the capable Soviet nuclear threat, but can't tolerate North Korea's mini-arsenal. To be sure, everyone would be much less edgy if Pyongyang could be induced to downshift to non-nuclear; and surely only China working with the US, as well as with Seoul and Tokyo, can make the near-impossible happen.

But maybe it's too late for that – let's just blame China, right? Certainly one gets from US media scant sense that Xi might also have a point in his [bitterness about the US anti-missile system being installed in South Korea](#). The THAAD (Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence) system is designed to knock down North Korean (or even, presumably, Chinese) missiles. The whole thing smells of US military-industrial complex run amok. The installation will render the Korean peninsula less stable (and perhaps inspire Beijing to counter with new systems of its own) – for the installation could theoretically create opportunity for the US to put a first-strike option “on the table”: vaporise 90-95 per cent of North Korean missile sites and assume THAAD will corral the retaliatory rest.

The South's front-running presidential candidate Moon Jae-in, of the centre-left Minjoo Party, says hold off on missile-defence deployment for the moment. His South Korea benefits enormously from trade with the mainland.



Then again, if THAAD proves a dud (hardly inconceivable with these complex systems), then its installation would have done nothing at all to protect South Korea – except to further spook Pyongyang and Beijing, and ratchet up a missile arms race. Caught in this mess are US friends the South Koreans, now scampering to find a new president; and US friends the Japanese, who have everything they need to become a nuclear power – except public support. Yet the hawkish administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe might get exactly that if the North Korean cowboys continue their missile-shot practice, their paranoia magnified by the macho US-South Korean ground exercises. Xi, who next month [travels to Mar-a-Lago in Florida for a weekend summit](#) with Trump, has a few cards he might play.

For starters, his government could [call off the nationalists hounding South Korean businesses](#) due to their government's US missile alliance. This infantile nonsense is beneath the dignity of China, a great and historic power, and does little to enhance trust in East Asia.

For its part, the US might say it views Beijing's overall presence in the South China Sea more like that of the US in the Caribbean than that of Russia in Crimea, and agree with Xi that a US signature on a non-aggression pact with Pyongyang would be much less harrowing than a nuclear missile crisis – as even Tokyo has been nervously muttering under its breath.

Xi could use some face to show North Korean leader Kim Jong-un that a nuclear freeze is a must if the regime-change option is to drop off the White House table. These gestures would help add to a sense of trust to US-China relations.

Even more detrimental than the imbalance of trade in the bilateral relationship is the imbalance of trust. It needs to be put right.

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Return to trust*