

PRESIDENTIAL CALLS AND THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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By Peter Hayes

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I. INTRODUCTION

This essay by Peter Hayes suggests that after three US-China presidential phone calls, President Trump appears to be the supplicant in the relationship; and increasingly so as the risk of war increases in Korea.

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II. NAPSNET POLICY FORUM BY PETER HAYES

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Since his inauguration, President Donald Trump has spoken by phone with China's President Jinping Xi on three occasions.

On such presidential calls, who calls who and the subsequent release of what was said are handled with exquisite care at both ends of the call. Here, we review the perceptual implications of these calls as to who is calling the shots in the US-China relationship with respect to North Korea.

We conclude that that overall, President Trump appears to be the supplicant in the relationship; and increasingly so as the risk of war increases in Korea.

February 9, 2017 Call

Trump's first call to Xi on February 9, 2017 was made at the White House's request. This is the call on which, as the [White House readout](#) puts it, "Trump agreed, at the request of President Xi, to honor our "one China" policy." This was widely reported as Trump backing down from his pre-inauguration threat to dump the one-China policy.

The call was made *after* [American officials concluded](#) that the call would be accepted only if Trump reverted to long-standing American policy. Thus the American readout refers accurately "at the request of President Xi" which makes Trump appear to magnanimously respond to Xi's request whereas in fact Trump ignominiously (albeit sensibly) acceded to Xi's demand to get in the door.

April 11, 2017 Call

The second (April 11, reported on April 12, 2017) call was reported widely as showing a strong presidential persona on the ball, holding Xi's feet to the fire after the Mar-a-Lago meeting on North

Korea and the chocolate cake-Syrian missile moment in the Xi-Trump dinner. The [White House readout](#) was circumspect, saying only: "It was a very productive call."

The [Chinese readout](#) obtained by CNN stated that Xi told Trump: "'China adheres to the goal of denuclearization of the peninsula and insists on preserving peace and stability on the peninsula. China advocates to resolve the issue through peaceful means, and is willing to maintain communication and coordination with the US on the Korean Peninsula issue.'" In other words, Xi accepted Trump's call and told him what was acceptable.

To find out that Trump requested the call, you had to go to Trump himself, who revealed this factoid in his interview with Fox news (last para of [transcript](#)), apparently blissfully unaware of the optics of who calls who. He said: "I'll tell you, we get along really well. I really like being with him. I'm going to be speaking to him tonight at 10:00, actually. I have a call tonight at 10:00. It's all set up with the president of China."

His phrasing is suggestive but not definitive as to who called who. So, we did some homework via colleagues in the "fake media" in Beijing (thank you, you know who you are!) who confirmed that indeed Trump called Xi and the call was made at the request of the White House.

In the Western media, this call was reported as Trump working the phone to avoid war in Korea and put pressure on China.

In China, the call likely confirmed Xi's impression of Trump the supplicant, Trump the blow-hard, Trump the bombast, Trump the bomber, Trump the bully, overall, Trump the weakling who can be managed by a combination of flattery, working his kin relations, and investing in some affordable economic measures that serve both parties interests (such as coordinating the two "infrastructure investment" presidential agendas to mutual benefit). If the third call is a good measure, this appears to be a sustainable narrative.

April 24, 2017 Call

The White House's April 24 "[Readout of President Donald J. Trump's Call with President Xi Jinping of China](#)" states that: "President Donald J. Trump spoke yesterday with President Xi Jinping of China to address issues regarding North Korea. President Trump criticized North Korea's continued belligerence and emphasized that Pyongyang's actions are destabilizing the Korean Peninsula. The two leaders reaffirmed the urgency of the threat posed by North Korea's missile and nuclear programs, and committed to strengthen coordination in achieving the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

This was [duly reported](#) in the *Washington Post*: "Trump discussed the situation with Chinese President Xi Jinping, who urged Washington and Pyongyang to meet each other halfway." *The Gray Lady's* [coverage](#) was indistinguishable from WAPO.

Sounds presidential, looks presidential, must be a president--Trump talking with and telling leaders of other great powers what's what. The naïve reader would be forgiven for even thinking that Xi called Trump worried about US military threats and nervous about US moves to go to war in Korea.

And indeed, this is precisely what we find in the American media, as in "[Pentagon Caught Off Guard by Team Trump's Tough Talk on North Korea](#)," (Daily Beast April 24) where we read: "In the midst of this, China's President Xi Jinping spoke to Trump by phone Sunday, perhaps worried that the strategic game pieces are aligning at odds with each other in ways that might take a life of their own."

How do we know that Trump initiated the latest (third) call?

We don't (neither the US White House readout nor the [Chinese official readout](#) inform us who set it up). However, the fact that Trump made two calls apparently back to back to Xi and Abe according to the White House press releases--

April 24, 2017: [Readout of President Donald J. Trump's Call with President Xi Jinping of China](#)

April 24, 2017: [Readout of President Donald J. Trump's Call with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan](#)

suggests that the White House set up the calls. The chance that Xi and Abe would call Trump on the same day, almost the same time is vanishingly small.

If this interpretation is correct, then it suggests to Xi and other observers in the region that Trump is still the supplicant, again revealing his relative weakness, not strength.

An important question is why Xi took the calls if he views Trump as supplicant? In the first call, he kept Trump at arm's length, refusing to take the call until Trump adjusted his policy. In the second call, immediately after the summit, he took the call, but lectured Trump on how to handle Korea. In the third call, he took the call, apparently concerned about the military buildup and risks of war. The fact that Trump is supplicant and weaker of the parties does not mean that Xi will is not concerned about the "kinetic Trump." Many leaders have stumbled into war and it would be strategically stupid for Xi to demur from talking to Trump at a time when the two sides of the DMZ are alive with firepower. A second Korean war would not be a fake war.

The record of the calls suggests that Trump was in his strongest position before the calls began. His pre-inauguration signals about abandoning the One China policy represented a threat to a Chinese core interest and they truly did not know his intention. Having forced him to turn around on this issue, they began accepting his calls, and Trump has been in free fall in Chinese eyes ever since—but may not even realize it.

Conclusion

All of the above does not mean that the Trump-Xi calls are insignificant. It is probably good that Xi is explaining to Trump about the risks he is taking in the Korean Peninsula. It is likely helpful for Xi to be reminding him of the limits of Chinese power and the stakes of war in Korea if Kim Jong Un is pushed to the wall (or something goes wrong unleashing inadvertent war via one of many conceivable pathways).

However, to the extent that these calls are part of the White House's bread-and-circuses routine, we should also recognize that these calls are part and parcel of the normalization of President Trump's ruling style by the American media to his domestic constituencies; and part of the drum-beat for fake wars and justification for risk-taking, mostly with non-American lives. This will impress no-one in East Asia, merely damage the United States' reputation.

That said, everyone is reading tea leaves. Readers should trust no-one (including this author). Do your homework. There may be other interpretations consistent with the limited data presented here.

Meanwhile, anyone actually know who initiated the third call?

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