

## Trump Is Beijing's Best Asset

**Chinese officials want the U.S. president reelected—because he's so weak.**

By Paul Haenle, Sam Bresnick

Among the many themes of Donald Trump's presidency, his contentious policies toward China stick out. U.S. foreign-policy experts have noted that Trump's almost three years in office have witnessed the long-held bipartisan consensus on China shift further and faster than in any other period in history, leading to a rapid and dramatic deterioration of one of the world's most consequential bilateral relationships.

Though there's broad political agreement on the need for the United States to take a tougher line on China, the administration's mercurial approach has led to criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike. Trump has prosecuted a costly trade war against Beijing, banned Huawei's technology from U.S. 5G networks, and recently placed visa restrictions on Chinese Communist Party officials involved in the extrajudicial incarceration of millions of Muslims in Xinjiang. He has marketed himself as the first U.S. president who is willing to get tough on China.

But for China, Trump's weaknesses are more important than his bluster. During numerous off the record discussions with Chinese government officials and scholars, we are finding that an increasing number are hoping for Trump's reelection next year. At a time when China's political influence and military capabilities are growing, they argue that in spite of his anti-China bluster, Trump has afforded Beijing the space to expand its influence across Asia and, more importantly, comprehensively weakened Washington's global leadership. From a zero-sum standpoint, many Chinese have concluded that Trump's policies are strategically very good for China in the long run.

These thinkers believe that Trump, by polarizing U.S. domestic politics, damaging Washington's international credibility and traditional global stewardship, and undermining long-standing alliance arrangements, has presented Beijing with its "greatest strategic opportunity since the end of the Cold War," as Yan Xuetong, one of China's foremost strategic thinkers, put it.

**These Chinese thinkers see Trump as a dog with a big bark but little bite.** He tested Beijing's patience by accepting a phone call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen, in what the Chinese viewed as a violation of the "One China" policy, shortly after his election in 2016. Trump publicly questioned whether he would stick with the policy before saying he would, but he also said he would have to check with Chinese President Xi Jinping before taking another call with Tsai. Though the administration has greenlighted some arms sales to Taiwan, whether Trump would back Taipei were Beijing to attack remains doubtful, especially given his mercenary attitude toward U.S. military power.

Beijing has already gained significantly from Trump's term in office. Despite prosecuting trade spats with India and the European Union, as well as China, the administration has largely given up on using World Trade Organization courts to litigate trade complaints and has blocked appointments to the organization's Appellate Body. These actions not only get in the way of the

world's most important trade dispute settlement system but also embolden other countries to ignore international law.

When not damaging global governance institutions and mechanisms that helped establish the United States as the world's preeminent superpower, Trump's antipathy toward trade deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership has afforded China an opening.

While Trump is shredding the cooperative trade agreements that have been central to U.S. international economic policy, Beijing is in the late stages of negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a deal that would tie China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations members into the world's largest trade bloc. If that agreement is ratified, the United States will be left out of the two largest global free trade deals, the other being the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, negotiated among 11 countries involved in the original Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations. This would add insult to injury, as China already trades more with every major Asian economy than the United States does.

These relinquishments of U.S. leadership in multilateral institutions provide China the space to take a greater role in global governance and in setting international rules and norms. Beijing has taken notice, asserting itself at the United Nations and submitting trade war-related complaints to the WTO, while promoting the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as a viable alternative to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Though Beijing has moved to make the Belt and Road Initiative the unparalleled vanguard project of global infrastructure development, the Trump administration has yet to provide a viable alternative.

Previous U.S. presidents have recognized that the United States gains strength from working with partners with which it shares values, history, and a sense of purpose. This is no more true than in its approach to the Asia-Pacific, and as Michael Green, a former senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council under President George W. Bush, recently said in testimony before Congress, "without allies, we have no China strategy."

But Trump has taken a starkly different approach, and his rhetoric, actions, and decisions have led countries to question whether they can count on the United States. Trump's has abandoned the Kurds, longtime partners in the Middle East; questioned America's commitment to NATO; and let the U.S. post-World War II East Asian alliance network decay.

As China expands its reach, South Korea and Japan, U.S. allies that have formed the backbone of the U.S. military's Northeast Asia security strategy for over 70 years, are locked in a bitter dispute that has led them to partially suspend their trade relationship. The Trump administration has largely ignored the dispute, displaying little understanding of the importance of these regional partners. Notwithstanding its long history of disagreements with both Tokyo and Seoul, Beijing has now stepped forward and offered to assist in settling the dispute, highlighting the absence of U.S. leadership on the issue.

The Trump administration's lack of diplomatic skill is also evident in Southeast Asia, as the Philippines, a U.S. ally, has drifted toward Beijing in recent years. Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte has made five trips to China and none to the United States since assuming office in 2016. In an all-too-apt display of Duterte's strategic alignment, the Philippines used Chinese money to build a new city on land that had once been part of Clark Air Base, a U.S. military installation established during the Spanish-American War. These developments come while Beijing

continues to ignore a U.N. ruling in favor of the Philippines in a South China Sea dispute, showing just how much Washington's relationship with Manila has regressed.

As for the trade war, the much-hyped mini-deal, which included agreements on purchases of agricultural goods and the elimination of future tariffs, fell well short of Trump's original goal of forcing Beijing to adopt critically important structural economic reforms that would help establish a balanced trade relationship with China over the long term.

Instead of rolling back Chinese subsidies and improving intellectual property protections, the deal mostly helps Trump relieve political pressure in agricultural states as he heads into the presidential campaign. This is part of a pattern where Trump sets high objectives, boasts he will achieve them, and then fails to deliver. The mini-deal was clearly welcomed in China, viewed as a victory for Xi, and provided further evidence that Trump's capricious behavior can be tolerated, if not managed. The Chinese will see Trump's acceptance of the watered-down deal, made up mostly of Chinese purchases that have been on the table for more than a year, as a sign of weakness as he faces possible impeachment and another grueling campaign.

Trump has pushed back against his advisors' more provocative and aggressive policy proposals while watering down others, such as the recent Xinjiang sanctions, which many members of Congress wanted to include Global Magnitsky Act provisions. In contrast, several Democratic presidential candidates, most notably Elizabeth Warren, have called for a tougher line on many China-related issues, including Hong Kong and human rights.

A different U.S. president could, and likely would, take a tougher tack on human rights and use the vast resources of all departments and agencies of the U.S. government to operationalize and execute a new and updated approach to China. Meanwhile, as the bilateral relationship becomes more contentious, many Chinese think that four more years of Trump weakening the United States' international standing could yield Beijing the space to consolidate its global gains and welcome a new American president in 2025 from an even more favorable strategic position.

\*\*\*

**To be clear, not every Chinese scholar or official with whom we talked wanted to see another four years of Trump.** Some, such as the University of International Relations professor Da Wei, have argued that Trump's damaging of both Chinese and U.S. interests could result in a deeply compromised international order and complicate Beijing's continued rise.

But those who hope for a second term see an unprecedented strategic opportunity for China in Trump's destruction of what they view as the key U.S. pillars of strength. By gutting U.S. political advantages at home, eviscerating America's reputation and credibility abroad, and subverting the heretofore solid alliance structure in the Asia-Pacific, Trump is weakening the United States. In doing so, he is granting China the opportunity to gain critical geopolitical advantages and create a more favorable international environment in which to advance its own interests.