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What Trump's election victory may mean for the future of US-China relations



*A hallmark of Donald Trump's first White House term was a confrontational policy towards trade with China. With his victory this week in the 2024 presidential election, **Elizabeth Ingleson** looks at how US-China relations may unfold in Trump's second presidential administration. She writes that Trump will likely go back to the trade wars with China he previously stoked, policies which are more likely to hurt than help the US working class.*

Donald Trump's decisive victory in the US presidential election on Tuesday evening was not at all the neck-and-neck result that most pundits and pollsters had been predicting. He not only won the Electoral College vote, but the popular vote as well; he has led his party to victory in the Senate and is looking strong in the House of Representatives too, which, as of writing remains undecided. These are emphatic results, allowing Trump to carry out his agenda with limited checks and balances, and they will have a significant impact on US-China relations.

A return to confrontation on trade

Trump's victory means that any lingering possibility—no matter how slight—of softening the Cold War mentality of zero-sum competition with China has been extinguished. In recent months, there had been small signs of appetite for a **more nuanced China policy** coming out of Washington circles; that the bipartisan consensus on China was not as hardened as was usually suggested. Under a Kamala Harris presidency, some of these voices may or may not have gained influence, but their possibilities under a new Trump administration are close to zero.

Instead, Trump will go back to the trade wars with China that he stoked during his first administration. On the campaign trail this year, he indicated again and again that he would impose

60 percent tariffs on Chinese goods across the board and 200 percent tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs). Tariffs are, as Trump **said in October**, “the most beautiful word in the dictionary.”

This has repercussions for President Joe Biden’s legacy too. Tuesday’s election results will be seen as part of a continuum that started with Trump’s first victory in 2016. When Trump first came to office, a consensus soon emerged in Washington that decades of engagement with China had failed, and strategic competition should be the way through which to assess China policy. These were sudden and significant changes, and the Biden administration retained many of them – especially the use of tariffs as a policy tool and the centring of strategic competition. Now, with a new Trump administration, these policies will be turbocharged. Biden’s China policy was not the same as Trump’s, but in the long term these distinctions will likely be swallowed up to become one part of this larger, shift. There is no scope, now, for suggesting that Trump’s first victory was the outlier.

The who and the how of Trump’s tougher China position

While the policy framework towards China will harden, there are, however, some question marks over the details of how Trump’s new administration will approach this toughened position. On the one hand, there is a group of advisors who call for the United States to push for greater emphasis on human rights and democracy-promotion within China. Mike Pompeo, Trump’s former Secretary of State, is often considered one such proponent. Earlier this year, Matt Pottinger, who served as deputy national security advisor in the first Trump administration, and Mike Gallagher, the former chairman of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* arguing this case.



“President Trump’s Trip to Asia” (Public Domain) by The Trump White House Archived

On the other hand, there are advisors such as Elbridge Colby, one of the authors of Trump’s **2017 National Security Strategy**, who maintain that the United States needs to turn its foreign policy efforts away from Europe and focus on Asia. **Colby argues** that the United States’ strategic goal

should be to stymie Chinese primacy in Asia through coalition building and anti-hegemonic balancing. If such an approach were to take hold under Trump, it would nonetheless be refracted through his transactional approach towards alliances. On Taiwan, for example, Trump **has indicated** he would expect the island to increase its military expenditure and pay the United States “protection fees” in return for military support.

Trump’s China policies will do almost nothing for US workers

While many of the details remain hazy about what a new Trump presidency will mean for relations with China, we do have an idea of what will *not* happen under this second Trump administration. It won’t improve the lives of the working class. If Trump’s threat of tariffs does materialise, then this will have a significant—potentially disastrous—impact on prices and inflation across the United States. It will make an already difficult cost of living crisis exponentially harder.

And for all of Trump, and his Vice President to be, J. D. Vance’s talk of returning manufacturing to American workers from a China that “stole” them, this will have marginal impact on American employment. It was not *manufacturing* that went into decline in the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century, it was manufacturing *employment*. Manufacturing remains one of the single biggest contributors to GDP, as it has since the Second World War, but since developments in technology and automation it now only comprises about eight percent of total US employment. No matter how many factories he speaks of opening, Trump won’t be helping most working-class Americans who are employed in service industries – a part of the economy in which around 80 percent of Americans work.

China will likely use this moment to position itself, by contrast, as a reliable participant in the international order. Its role in recent Middle East diplomacy and its deepening ties with the Global South have been central to Chinese President Xi Jinping’s cultivation of this image. But so too is Xi likely to continue the action-reaction spiral that has characterised US-China relations in recent years. He has already responded to the Biden administrations’ tariffs by ramping up his own trade restrictions: such as implementing export controls on crucial minerals like gallium and germanium which are used in making semiconductors and launched investigations into imposing tariffs on petroleum-powered cars. During the first Trump presidency, Xi imposed his own counter tariffs. If Trump’s much higher 60 percent tariffs do come into effect, we will likely see similar responses from Beijing as last time. This time around, however, they may be hampered by the fact that China’s economy is far less strong than it was in the late 2010s.

The climate crisis is still bigger than US-China strategic competition

It is possible—probable, in fact—that in the long sweep of US-China relations, this election, and the era of which it is a part, will be remembered less for the geopolitical rivalry underpinning the tariffs, competition, and escalating tensions and more for the fact that at a time of global environmental catastrophe the world's two most powerful countries turned even flawed solutions like EVs into pawns of that rivalry.

Regardless of what is happening politically, the biggest story of our times is not power politics but the human-induced climate crisis. US-China competition is one part of this bigger story, not the other way around: the climate crisis is not one part of the US-China rivalry, even if it is currently being treated that way. If there is a glimmer of hope, albeit small, it is that the responsibility for addressing the climate crisis is neither Trump's nor Xi's alone. With a climate crisis denier in the White House, the responsibilities—and possibilities—for leadership on climate are greater now for the United Kingdom and other nations than they have been in decades. It remains to be seen whether they are able to rise to this tremendous challenge.

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