

Trump, China and the Struggle for Leadership in Asia¹

This presentation focuses on the growing US-China rivalry for influence in Asia and particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, ranging from India in the west to Japan in the Northeast and Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands in the Southeast.

It first assesses the roots of the intensified US rivalry with China in Asia by explaining the US hardening against China prevailing for past eight years to defend America from multifaceted and serious Chinese challenge including in the Indo-Pacific

There follows a brief review of how this American hardening was carried out by the first Donald Trump administration and the following Joseph Biden administration to reach a judgment that the United States after significant decline in influence relative to rising China in the previous decade improved its influence in the Indo-Pacific region significantly with the Biden government.

Then comes treatment of developments in 2024 and 2025 leading to rising regional angst and uncertainty about the negative impacts caused by Trump government actions. *[explain book manuscript and 250+ interviews 2024-2025]* An interim assessment of salient developments shows no immediate or fundamental change in the influence the two superpowers exert in the Indo-Pacific region. But it demonstrates an overall erosion of regional support for the United States under the Trump administration, particularly among allies and partners compelled to grudgingly accommodate a wide range of US demands with negative implications for their interests. The alignment of these countries interests with those of the Trump government is much less than during the Biden administration, forecasting continued gradual decline in US influence relative to rising China in the Indo-Pacific in the remaining years of the Trump government.

Context: US Hardening against China's Challenges

Countering China's challenges became and remains top priority--more important than Ukraine war, Middle East conflict

Hardening underway for eight years

- Explain solid Trump strategy but erratic Trump implementation; Democrats inattentive, Biden dismissive
- Bi-partisan majorities in Congress more resolved—work effectively with Trump administration leaders and later Biden and his team.

What are the dangers and why the urgency and drive to counter China's challenges

Explain the 3 clusters of challenges

First is the challenge posed by the over three-decades of rapid development of Chinese modern military power tipping the balance in the Indo-Pacific, supporting Chinese

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territorial expansionism and undermining US alliances and partnerships in seeking dominance in the region. The American strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region has been based since World War II on preventing the region falling under the control of a power hostile to the United States. If that were to happen, that power would pose a direct threat to the United States, comparable to the threat the US faced from imperial Japan's dominance in Asia and Nazi Germany's dominance in Europe in the dark days at the start of World War II.

Second is the challenge posed by China's similarly longstanding efforts using state-directed development polices to plunder foreign intellectual property rights and using massive intervention by the wide ranging and well financed apparatus of the Chinese party-state structure to undermine international competitors having increasingly profound negative impacts on US and Western interests. Beijing has done so with hidden and overt state-directed economic coercion, egregious government subsidies, import protection, and export promotion using highly protected and state-supported products to weaken and often destroy foreign competition in key industries. In this way, it recently seeks dominance in major world high technology industries and related military power to displace the United States and secure China's primacy in Asia and world leadership.

Third is China's challenge to global governance. More than any other major power, Beijing leverages economic dependence, influence operations including pervasive corruption and elite capture, and control of important infrastructure to compel deference to its preferences. In the Indo-Pacific region, these practices are backed by intimidating Chinese military power. China's preferences include legitimating the above predatory Chinese economic practices and territorial expansionism; opposition to efforts promoting accountable governance, human rights and democracy; opposition to US alliances seen impeding China's rise; and support for the forceful foreign advances of Vladimir Putin's Russia and the rule of other authoritarian and often corrupt world leaders unaccountable to their citizens.

Two challenges continue to be seen as particularly dangerous, existential threats to fundamental American national security and well being.

- The first is the Chinese effort to undermine US power and influence in and dominate Asia.
- The second is the Chinese effort to seek dominance in the high technology industries of the future; such dominance will make America subservient to Chinese economic power, and because such technology is essential to modern national security, subservient to Chinese military power.

Seeking to avoid Chinese dominance has remained a strong overall driver of the efforts of bipartisan majorities in Congress and administration partners to defend America against China's challenges.

Biden's strategy, success to "check" China 2021-2024

Positions of strength at home and abroad—explain each

Impact of Putin invasion of Ukraine Feb 2022—creation of international alignment against both Russia and China

Explain debate over Pelosi visit to Taiwan August 2022—resolute advances countering China at home and abroad

Explain Xi Jinping—Biden summit Nov 2022—China compromises over guardrails, new charm offensive—explain reasons

Explain disruptive interlude but return to more moderation with Biden-Xi California summit Nov. 2023

Biden campaigns on his China record—checks China

**2024: Regional Angst and Uncertainty Anticipating Trump 2.0;
2025: Decisive Trump Actions Prompt Alarm, Resentment and Grudging Accommodation**

2024

- Few positives seen in past Trump administration and in Trump re-election
- Uncertainty and considerable angst over future US actions in Trump 2.0 adds to serious ongoing concerns of regional governments over:
 - conflicting pressures coming from acute US-China rivalry and growing worry over US resolve to provide leadership in the region.
 - uncertainty also comes from factors apart from US-China rivalry including:
 - growing protectionism among developed countries cutting off markets for Asia's export oriented economies,
 - strong domestic opposition in several countries to their current foreign policy stances,
 - North Korea's continued provocations backed by an expanding nuclear weapons arsenal,
 - failure to resolve the civil war in Myanmar;
 - stark divisions in Asia over Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the likelihood that Russia's ally China would do the same against Taiwan
 - Often conflicting goals of ever more active regional powers India and Japan and middle powers Australia, Indonesia and South Korea in pursuing policy priorities.

Level of Worry and Concern

Taiwan and Philippines:

- most anxious—on “front line” facing Chinese pressure and worried about continued US support. government policy faces strong domestic opposition—adds to angst

South Korea.

- Preoccupied with presidential leadership crisis.
- Some believe Trump can be managed but others see S Korea targeted on burdensharing and trade surplus with US

Japan.

Also on the front lines and anxious, but faces less domestic division than Taiwan, Philippines and S Korea.

- Fairly confident Trump can be managed without major costs for Japan.

Southeast Asia

- Most governments judge ongoing hedging, avoiding negatives toward either the US or China and seeking benefit from both, will manage Trump effectively, though abrupt large tariffs will be destabilizing.
- Singapore also worries about longer term US withdrawal from Asia and US reversal on Russia and Ukraine

Australia

- Not worried about Trump given good record of Australia-US ties in first Trump administration
- More worried about what Trump election means for broader US resolve to sustain leadership in Indo-Pacific, longer term US withdrawal from Asia.

India

- Not particularly anxious
- Modi consistent with 2016 and 2020 in avoiding favoring a candidate
- Modi welcomes strong US ties as a counterweight to China’s rise but pursues balancing act to sustain close Russian ties, work cooperatively with BRICS, and pursue new Chinese willingness to ease border tensions. India avoids taking sides with West over Ukraine

China

- Not anxious
- ready for negatives posed by Trump; no Chinese compromises; no preference in election
- Optimistic longer term view by some—predicting US decline and withdrawal enabling China’s regional ascendance

2025. Trump administration actions and implications

Trump exerts much greater power and control than in first term. He shows extraordinary control over:

1. the federal government,
2. Republicans in the majorities in Congress, and
3. the Supreme Court—6 out of 9 appointed by Republicans, 3 of the six appointed by Trump

White House and administration leaders all very accommodating to President Trump

Waves of Executive Orders prompting sweeping changes in governance. Tariffs much worse than anticipated in Asia.

Key developments in Indo-Pacific:

1. Scraps and reverses Biden's seeking, gaining and using cooperative strong relations with allies and partners to strengthen US power and influence in dealing with major opponents China and Russia.

- Most dramatic reversal seen in public disdain of Ukraine and European allies and strong coercive measures targeting Ukraine in seeking a settlement of the Russia-Ukraine war supported by remarkable US rhetorical and policy accommodation of Russia. That the shift in favor of Putin had to be modified and reversed added to regional uncertainty and angst about what US would do next.
- Similarly abrupt and negatively impactful threats directed at allies Canada, Mexico, Denmark, Panama and Columbia to force accommodation with Trump administration priorities.
- Ongoing complaints from President Trump and administration leaders regarding allies and partners in Europe and Asia are taking advantage of the United States; Trump demands of equitable trade balances, more allied military preparedness and greater military burden sharing.

2. More tariffs, export and investment controls—causing much greater than anticipated disruption and restrictions in international economic interchanges:

- At first focused on China and important imports steel aluminum, cars.
- “reciprocal tariffs”—In Asia, hits Japan, S Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh; and then 90 day pause and eventually ease with China.
- Waves of trade deals modify the impact on targeted countries but the impact is much worse than anticipated

3. Freezing US foreign aid, threatening the sovereignty of Canada, Panama, Greenland, reversing Biden climate change policies, withdrawing from UN and other international organizations.

- These actions are criticized widely in the Indo-Pacific.
- When combined with stark Trump administration rebukes of Ukraine and NATO allies, perceived growing US alignment with Russia, highly disruptive unilateral tariffs and little high-level US positive attention to and consultation with allies

and partners, these reinforce a prevailing regional judgment of US disengagement from leadership in the region.

- Specialists in China see this trend facilitating China's rise to Asian dominance.

4. Trump's China policy—conflicting trends

- Trump compelled to pause on a trade war with China but China in the current “pause” faces tariffs up 55 percent over previous levels, which were already high. Trump is transactional and sees advantage in negotiating with China over trade, other matters and perhaps Taiwan.
- On the other hand, while a trade deal with China similar to the 2020 agreement would be uncontroversial, a reversal of US policy supporting Taiwan and accommodating Chinese expansionism risks big backlash domestically from bipartisan US majorities of public opinion, media and in Congress who strongly distrust Xi Jinping and oppose his ambitions.
 - Trump's administration actions continue efforts to shore up US economic, military and other capacities and to work with allies and partners to counter and deter Chinese expansionism
 - Bipartisan majorities in Congress remain very focused on countering a wide range of often serious challenges posed by Chinese behavior targeted the United States at home and abroad.
 - Vice President Vance suggested that the US reversal on Ukraine and Russia did not signal forthcoming accommodation of China, arguing that the pull back from Ukraine was needed to muster resources to compete with China
 - Secretary of State Rubio said the recent accommodation of Russia was needed to weaken the Chinese capacities by undermining the Russian alignment with China.

Review status of US-China competition in Indo-Pacific

A big change in US government regional motives. For decades, two main motives were given for cooperative engagement with Indo-Pacific.

- Sustain a favorable balance of power
- Imperative to engage cooperatively with this most economically vibrant world region

The Trump government has scrapped the second motive, viewing economic efforts over the past few decades as an egregious failure with major negative consequences for US national power and economic well being. Some Republican leaders supporting the Administration's America First orientation urge pulling away from Asia, but the administration's strong emphasis on tariffs reflects a determination to continue engagement and to use access to the US market as a way to force changes that would benefit America and thereby justify continued strong US engagement with the region.

US relations with allies and partners [Australia, India, Japan, The Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan]. At one level, these relations have been sorely tested by unilateral imposition of Trump's tariffs along with disrespectful rhetoric and disregard for key elements of the regional order like national sovereignty, a rules-based order, and previous commitments of concern to regional countries such as combating climate change. Against this background, the anticipated Trump administration demands for these countries to pay more or otherwise do more to support US troops stationed in the region and to boost their defense spending in line with US demands will further alienate the allies and partners from the United States

Nevertheless, on another level, the Trump tariffs have demonstrated to most of these nations how important access to the US market is for their economic well being. And all of them see the United States as an essential strategic counterweight to China's ambitions coming at the expense of their territory and/or national security, with South Korea and Japan also relying on the US to counter dangers from North Korea.

Privately, if not publicly, all of these government's acknowledge their negative recent experiences with recent major pressures from China seeking to have its way at their expense. Without US support, their ability to defend their interests in the face of Chinese power would be inadequate.

There is a lot of media and think tank speculation that these allied leaders will come to see China as an alternative to the US market, but elites in these countries expect little positive from China in this regard. Given Beijing's need to sell elsewhere products previously sold in America, Beijing has been flooding their and many other domestic markets with manufactured goods lower in price than domestic producers in these regional countries.

Where do individual countries stand in US-China competition?

India. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has unexpectedly faced the most negative US pressure in this group. For 25 years, he and earlier Indian governments have had strong support from the United States seeking to empower India even more. And Modi got off to a good start with President Trump during a friendly meeting at the White House in February.

But developments since then have featured US actions challenging Indian interest in ways not seen in many years. The Trump Administration's even-handed treatment of May clashes of Indian air and ground forces with Pakistan involving a terrorist attack on Indian civilians in disputed Kashmir departed from past US practice of giving priority to India over Pakistan. This was followed by a dramatic US "re-set" in relations with Pakistan as the head of the Pakistan Army, widely seen as the most important Pakistan government decision-maker, had a friendly three hour lunch with President Trump at the White House in June and reportedly is planning another meeting with President Trump in August. Meanwhile, Trump showed impatience with the incomplete US-Indian trade

negotiations and doubled the stated 25% to a rate of 50% imposed in August. Also, India could have judged that Trump's positive turn toward Putin early in the administration would mean little US concern with close Indian-Russian ties. But as Trump turned against Putin, he strongly rebuked India for purchasing Russian oil. Modi is now maneuvering with summits with Russian and Chinese leaders, presumably seeking leverage to deal with Trump's demands. Modi has been through a period of prolonged challenges and pressures along the disputed border with Xi Jinping's China. It's hard to see how Modi could shift and turn to China for support, suggesting he'll need to join other allies and partners alienated by Trump demands to nonetheless grudgingly accommodate Trump to a considerable degree.

Australia and Japan. Both key allies are upset and are seeking alternative paths to support their security and economic interests but for the foreseeable future see the US alliance as essential and thereby try to make the best of negative treatment coming from the Trump government. Both endeavor to keep open positive engagement with China, with Beijing more favorable to Australia than to Japan.

South Korea. Its deep concerns with Trump policies remain overshadowed by domestic preoccupations. Its need for the alliance is also very strong. It also pursues positive engagement with China.

Taiwan. Remains more dependent on the US to counter acute Chinese pressures than any other country. Does what is needed to keep US support

The Philippines. A major exception; sees Trump's policies working positively for their interests.

All the above allies and partners worry that President Trump will add to their difficulties by making a security deal with China adverse to their interests. Worry about this possible outcome has diminished as Trump security leaders have taken strong positions and strong actions to confront Chinese expansionism in the Indo-Pacific with a focus on defending Taiwan.

Russia, Central Asian countries, Mongolia, Pakistan, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar
All lean heavily toward China with much less attention to the United States. But Pakistan strongly welcomes Trump's "re-set" of relations. The US market is very important for Cambodia and Pakistan. Leaders in most of these countries seek positive US attention as a means to support their domestic legitimacy and perhaps provide some leverage to use in dealing with Russia and/or China.

Southeast Asia. Very much "in play" in US-China competition. Philippines is pro US; Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar side with China; Malaysia and Thailand (ostensibly a US ally) are slowly gravitating closer to China; Vietnam remains very carefully balanced between the two superpowers; Singapore leans toward the United States but is deeply impacted by Trump's disregard for the international order Singapore relies on; Indonesia

postures as a strong independent regional power—the previous president leaned to China and its BRI; the current president is more balanced.

Secondary areas

New Zealand—close to Australia and opposes Chinese influence in Pacific Islands but is not as committed as Australia to countering the Chinese danger

Pacific Islands—US dominant influence in FAS; Australia, NZ, Japan, Fr, Taiwan more important than China elsewhere. China has debt reputation and less money to spend than in recent past; yet it has a strong presence in most countries and is in a position to exert influence through secret and corrupt deals if needed to make opportunistic gains that could lead to a security presence or “stronghold” in a strategic location. Presently it’s more a troublemaker than a threat but requires constant vigilance by US, allies and partners

South Asia states: Bangladesh, SL, Nepal and Maldives—India seems more important than China. US backing India helps. China has a debt reputation and less money to spend. No big China breakthrough anticipated, though India backed by US and by Japan, Australia (in the four nation Quad) and others remain vigilant.

Concluding judgments

Recent developments up to this point show no immediate or fundamental change in the balance of influence exerted by the US and China in their competition for influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Trump administration takes pride in how it has demonstrated much greater power and determination in restricting access to the US market to compel allies, partners and opponents to accommodate the president’s demands. These countries have all fallen in line with US favored pattern of negotiating bilateral trade deals. The process has seen a fundamental reversal of the previous US administration’s collaborative and cooperative approach in joining with allies and partners to build positions of strength to counter serious challenges posed by Chinese government practices.

The Trump administration treatment of allies and partners regarding trade issues has alienated most of these leaders—The Philippines is an exception. After assessing their interests, grudging cooperation results. Longer term consequences could lead to more fundamental recalculation but for now no such path seems evident. Meanwhile, Trump administration demands on allies and partners for greater defense burdensharing and expenditures are anticipated to become more prominent following the trade deals and are likely to further alienate these leaders.

China for its part remains unrelenting in pursuing its advantages at others expense. Its behavior reinforces Xi Jinping’s record using coercion and pressure tactics against each of the US allies and partners, which have strongly alienated them from China. Meanwhile, China has no intention or ability to provide an alternative market for other countries as it

pursues its strong export expansionism in ways that add to the challenges faced by all the export oriented Indo-Pacific nations.

There are doubtless numerous ways regional states can benefit by positioning themselves in Chinese focused production chains but such an approach has limits imposed by China weak consumer market and ever growing international restrictions to counter perceived Chinese dumping. Unlike US allies and partners, many of the other Indo-Pacific countries have not been subjected to strong adverse pressures from China, which has motivated US allies and partners to do what is needed to sustain a close relationship with the United States. China is steady and consistent in pursuing its advantage which can be seen more positively than the Trump government's erratic changes and unilateral imposition of new policies adverse to regional countries.

Against this background, China is in a better position to spread its influence in competition with the United States in the Indo-Pacific. Most immediately, China will gain relative influence as US allies and partners alienated by Trump administration demands adverse to their interests will be less likely to collaborate enthusiastically in efforts to counter Chinese challenges with a domineering superpower with a leader exerting extraordinary power in unpredictable ways