

**US-China relations**

## Chinese officials struggle to build ties with Donald Trump's campaign

Hostility to Beijing in Washington hinders attempt to establish relations ahead of US presidential election



Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the US during the Trump presidency. He has one of the best Washington networks of any Chinese official © AFP/Getty Images

**Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington 3 HOURS AGO

Chinese officials are failing to secure meetings with Donald Trump’s campaign officials and surrogates, underscoring the hawkish sentiment in Washington and concerns about espionage and influence operations.

Beijing’s attempt to build ties with [Trump’s](#) team have included deploying Cui Tiankai, ambassador to Washington during the Trump administration. But the outreach efforts have been largely unsuccessful, according to eight US and Chinese people familiar with the situation.

Chinese officials and visiting scholars — some of whom are seen as proxies for Beijing — have already been struggling to meet US lawmakers but are now facing similar barriers with Trump’s team.

Steve Yates, chair of the China policy initiative at the America First Policy Institute, which is affiliated with many former Trump officials, said there was “very little upside” in meeting officials from the country.

Trump’s views on China were well known and there was a risk that meetings would be “misconstrued”, Yates said, adding that the former president’s [election campaign](#) was focused on winning in November.

“There is a much higher degree of discipline among Trump campaign members and surrogates than . . . in 2016,” said Yates, a Trump surrogate in that campaign and former deputy national security adviser to vice-president Dick Cheney.

The frustrated overtures to Trump come amid rising bipartisan [hostility towards China in Washington](#) and a realisation in Beijing that US policy was unlikely to become less hawkish regardless of who wins the election. Trump plans to impose steep tariffs on Chinese exports while Kamala Harris, his Democratic party opponent, recently said “America, not China” would win the competition for the 21st century.

Many other countries are also trying to build contacts with Trump advisers to avoid the mistake they made in 2016 when they failed to cultivate ties because they dismissed his chances of winning the election.

Trump advisers are also seeking to avoid any repeat of 2016, when meetings with Russian officials before the inauguration — most notably between Moscow’s ambassador Sergei Kislyak and Michael Flynn, who became national security adviser — sparked investigations.

Victoria Coates, a former deputy national security adviser to Trump who is now at the Heritage Foundation, said even routine meetings between the 2016 transition team and Russian diplomats were “exploited by the career government bureaucracy to entrap senior officials”.

“It is hardly surprising that potential future Trump officials would be wary of taking meetings with an adversarial country like China that could be manipulated or mischaracterised to suggest collusion with an enemy,” she said.

Dennis Wilder, a former CIA China expert and top White House Asia adviser to George W Bush, said Beijing had been “aggressively looking for opportunities” to connect with the Trump team but was unsuccessful.

“The belief in part is that the Chinese are simply involved in intelligence gathering as opposed to looking for real discussions,” said Wilder.

Cui has one of the best Washington networks of any Chinese official. During the Trump years, he formed a relationship with Ivanka Trump and her husband Jared Kushner, who was a conduit for ambassadors.

Robert Daly, head of the Wilson Center’s Kissinger Institute on China and the US, said Cui would be an “excellent emissary”, but the landscape had changed. “What

advantage would the Trump team see in meeting with Cui at this stage, when any such discussions could be interpreted as a Chinese attempt at influence?”

While Cui is viewed as a legitimate diplomat, he serves as an adviser to the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, which Wilder said was “not officially an intelligence collection organisation [but] is used by Chinese intelligence to gain access to international visitors of interest”.

The reluctance to engage extends beyond Cui and other officials. One Chinese scholar said he and his peers had “very poor access” to the Trump team. “My speculation is they think Chinese visitors have malign intentions, like collecting intelligence or try[ing] to exert influence,” he said.

One person familiar with the situation said some Trump advisers were nervous that meeting Chinese officials could hurt their chances of working in a future administration.

One former Trump official said there were concerns about the affect it could have on getting security clearances.

The Trump campaign did not respond to a request for comment. The Chinese embassy declined to comment, but one person familiar with Cui's thinking dismissed the idea that he would not grasp why officials were reluctant to engage.

“The last thing the Chinese want is either to make any specific people in the US feel uncomfortable or to do anything that could be characterised, or worse mischaracterised, as meddling in the election,” the person said.

Diplomats in Washington are scrambling to develop contacts with Harris's team after she replaced Biden as the Democratic nominee, but several experts said it was unclear as to who would advise her on Asia policy.

But an aide to Harris said Beijing knew her stance on China, saying her and Biden's position “continues to be communicated through regular engagements by Biden-Harris administration officials”.

“Since taking office she has worked to ensure the United States wins the competition with China and stands up for our values and interests — and she will continue to do so. She also has met with President Xi Jinping and made our position clear,” the aide added.

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