

**Chinese politics & policy**

## **What Donald Trump's closer ties to Russia mean for China**



Rapprochement with Moscow over war in Ukraine serves Beijing's aim of multipolar world order

**Joe Leahy** in Beijing and **Max Seddon** in Berlin

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Donald Trump's dramatic reshaping of the geopolitical order this week, which aligned the US with China and Russia rather than Washington's European allies, has raised rich opportunities for Xi Jinping, but also dangers for the Chinese leader, said analysts.

In a stark indication of Washington's reordered priorities, Russia and China [backed a US resolution](#) at the UN Security Council that called for a "swift end" to the war in Ukraine but did not blame Moscow for the conflict. France and the UK, which had sought to delay the vote, abstained.

The US president's embrace of transactional politics suggests he might be more open to negotiate with [China](#) on trade, export controls and even perhaps Washington's support for Taiwan, said experts.

But they added that Xi would be wary of what some Chinese analysts see as a US effort to drive a wedge between Beijing and its close partner, Moscow.

"We are entering into a new world now. With Trump 2.0, this liberal international order is crumbling," said Wang Dong, executive director of Peking University's Institute for Global Cooperation and Understanding.

The fragmentation of the western-led liberal order is a vindication of Xi's worldview. For years, he has spoken of "major changes unseen in a century" — Chinese Communist party-speak for the decline of the US and the rise of China in a more multipolar world.

Experts quoted in Chinese state media said US efforts to engineer an end to the [war in Ukraine](#) demonstrated western weakness and rewarded Russian President Vladimir Putin's use of force.

It also raises doubts about US support for its partners, which foreign analysts said could lend Xi a freer hand in pushing Taiwan to accept Beijing's claim of sovereignty.





US and Russian officials hold talks in Saudi Arabia this month. The rapprochement has raised doubts about Washington's support for its partners © Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein/Pool

But some Chinese analysts worry that US rapprochement with Russia might be a ploy to make it easier for Washington to concentrate on containing China.

“There have been, at least with PRC academics, some concerns about some sort of ‘reverse Nixon,’” said Ja Ian Chong, associate professor of political science at the National University of Singapore, referring to former US president Richard Nixon’s decision in the 1970s to repair relations with the People’s Republic of China in order to put pressure on their mutual rival, the Soviet Union. The idea this time would be to isolate Beijing.

For Russia, détente with the US would help reduce its economic reliance on China after sanctions cut it off from many global markets and the EU, hitherto its largest trading partner. Russia’s trade with China hit \$245bn last year — a record but still less than Moscow’s \$270bn in trade with the EU in 2021, the last full year before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

“The recent drastic reorientation towards China has been out of necessity, not a deliberate policy choice,” said Vasily Astrov of the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies. “Any diversification of economic options away from China would certainly be in Russia’s interest.”

But Thomas Graham, a former senior director for Russia on the US National Security Council, said the US was unlikely to break Moscow’s long-term strategy of deepening its partnership with Beijing.

“Xi and Putin talk all the time. They’re best buddies,” said Graham. “The idea that we can give the Russians Ukraine and everything they want in Europe, and they’d say: ‘Come to think of it, we really don’t like the Chinese and we’re going to break those ties’ — it’s just a delusion.”

In a call this week with Putin, Xi took pains to reaffirm the strength of the relationship, saying China and Russia were “true friends” ready to share “weal and woe”.



Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping hold a video call last month. The leaders have reaffirmed the closeness of their ties © Gavriil Grigorov/Sputnik/Kremlin Pool/AP

Peking University’s Wang Dong noted that any deal with Trump could be unwound by the next administration. “If you were leaders sitting in Beijing and Moscow, would you be so naive to believe that all the problems between Moscow and Washington will just disappear?”

Given the volatility, some Chinese academics said a warmer personal relationship between Trump and Xi [could facilitate a grand bargain](#) on tariffs, trade and the sale of Chinese app TikTok’s US operations.

“Beijing might consider racing with Putin to invite Trump to China and go to the US before Putin does,” said Shen Dingli, a Shanghai-based international relations professor.

Western scholars said the US about-face on Ukraine and [previous comments by](#)

[Trump](#) also raised questions about his willingness to maintain support for Taiwan.

“Xi may look at the US decision to negotiate directly with Russia about the war in Ukraine, without a seat at the table for Ukraine, as a precedent for direct negotiations with Trump over Taiwan,” wrote David Sacks, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, in a post on its Asia Unbound blog.

Others, however, argued that Xi would be opposed to any suggestion that Beijing’s territorial claims over Taiwan were open to negotiation.

“Xi will gladly accept any concessions Trump might offer on Taiwan, but his primary focus in negotiations will be staving off US economic measures,” said Neil Thomas, a fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute’s Center for China Analysis.

China could also try to seize the opportunity to improve relations with Europe amid Trump’s falling-out with the continent’s leading powers.

Wang Wen, professor and executive dean of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China, said in an interview with the state-owned National Business Daily that Trump’s actions showed “contempt” for Ukraine and Europe.

“The Chinese are certain they can exploit transatlantic threats in order to improve their position in Europe,” said Sergey Radchenko, a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. “If there’s one person who’s doing [Nixon] in reverse, it’s Xi Jinping.”

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