

Opinion **US foreign policy**

The Indo-Pacific grapples with a reckless China and feckless US

Increasing uncertainty clouds the region's future as it tries to decipher Trump's line on Beijing

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While the world was engrossed by the Oval Office struggle session between President Donald Trump, Vice-President JD Vance and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, we Australians watched it in split screen. On one side, a US president bullied a wartime leader fighting for his country's survival. On the other, a Chinese naval task group circumnavigated the Australian continent in a pointed display of power. In international waters off our east coast, without providing advance notice, the flotilla conducted live-fire exercises.

US allies in the Indo-Pacific, including Australia, have long been concerned about Beijing's intentions. Now we also worry about Washington's reliability. What if, in future, we face the worst possible combination: a reckless China and a feckless America?

Donald Trump's attitude to Russia is clear. But what is his settling point on China? Those who believe that Trump 2.0 will be tough on Beijing note that he ended his first term in an adversarial posture. He had tariffed Chinese goods, approved arms sales to Taiwan and revived the Quad, the security partnership between the US, India, Japan

and Australia. As he felt his re-election slipping through his fingers, Trump blamed China for Covid-19, calling it “the Chinese virus” and “kung flu”.

But for much of his first term, an accommodation with Beijing seemed as likely as an argument. The US president often prefers the company of autocrats to democratic leaders, and he was intrigued by Chinese President Xi Jinping. In 2017, Trump hosted Xi in grand style at Mar-a-Lago, with one of his granddaughters singing a Chinese folk song in Mandarin.

It’s true that the new administration contains many China hawks, including secretary of state Marco Rubio and national security adviser Mike Waltz. But they comprise just one faction in Trumpworld, alongside Maga, the tech bros, the business stiffes and the Trump family — each of which has different interests when it comes to China. Elon Musk, for example, has significant China exposure through his companies and ties to the leadership in Beijing. Trump skates above these factions, intervening at will. His preferences are determinative.

Since his inauguration, Trump has applied 20 per cent tariffs on Chinese imports, among others against Canada and Mexico. He has claimed, without evidence, that China controls the Panama Canal and has vowed to take it back.

When Trump is asked about China, however, he goes straight to the positive. “I happen to like [Xi] a lot”, he said recently. “I love talking to him.” Trump invited Xi to his inauguration, and there is speculation about an early rendezvous between the two leaders — either a meeting in China in April, or a “birthday summit” in the US in June, the month when both men celebrate their birthdays.

Anti-China sentiment runs high in the US Congress. Trump has a different take. His concerns about China relate not to its external behaviour, its designs on Taiwan or its internal human rights record, but to its trade surplus with the US.

If Beijing behaves in a way that threatens America’s core interests or makes Trump look weak, he would confront China. But he will not be inclined to spend American blood and treasure on behalf of allies, many of whom he regards as freeloaders. Does anyone believe Trump would risk war with China to protect Taiwan? To ask the question is to answer it.

There is little evidence that Trump is cosyng up to the Kremlin in order to drive a wedge between Russia and China. In any case, both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Xi have made it clear that won’t happen.

Trump may be tempted by a deal with China, especially if Beijing were to provide a term sheet tailored to his America First worldview. It's early days, and a grand bargain would be hard to strike and even harder to maintain. Still, imagine if China promised to invest and manufacture more in the US and export less, in return for getting more elbow room in its own neighbourhood. Imagine if Xi turns out to be as skilful as Putin in handling Trump.

The hawks around Trump would hate the idea of trading away the security interests of the US and its allies in Asia. The same people no doubt hate current US policy towards Russia and Ukraine, yet they are going along with it.

At Mar-a-Lago in 2017, Trump served Xi what he claimed was "the most beautiful piece of chocolate cake that you've ever seen". Australians and other US allies now wonder: how will Trump cut up the cake in the Indo-Pacific?

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