

Opinion **US-China relations**

Trump is the gift that keeps giving to China

The US president is upending a quarter of a century of American policy in the Indo-Pacific

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Donald Trump and Xi Jinping at the G20 summit in Osaka in 2019. The US president has stepped back from shoring up China's neighbours © Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images

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The year is barely halfway done but China is 2025's runaway winner. With metronomic regularity, Donald Trump has been dropping giant windfalls into its lap. Such is Trump's awe of Xi Jinping, which seems only to grow with the latter's unyieldingness, that observers could be forgiven for thinking Trump wants China to keep on winning. Amid a sea of bipartisan hawkishness, Trump is the last China dove in Washington. Yet his is the only voice that counts.

Trump's respect for China puts it in a category of one. Zbigniew Brzezinski once accused his fellow grand strategist Henry Kissinger of "an obvious fascination with enemies and an *ennui* with friends". Each of America's Indo-Pacific friends have encountered the same with Trump. It was ever thus. As far back as the late 1980s, Trump's bugbear was Japan, not the Soviet Union. On the rare occasion nowadays that Trump blames China, he identifies the true culprit as US corporations. Were he in China's shoes, Trump says, he too would be eating America's lunch.

The geopolitical effects of Trump 2.0 cannot be overstated. Since the start of this century, successive US administrations have sought to shore up China's neighbours. Trump is undoing that with remarkable celerity. Of these, India is the most startling. Its prime minister, Narendra Modi, plays the strongman at home but has been as sycophantic to Trump as any world leader. Flattery has got him nowhere. Last week, Trump vowed 25 per cent tariffs on India and accused New Delhi of funding Russia's war on Ukraine via oil imports. One hundred per cent "secondary tariffs" on India could follow.

Aiding the emergence of a strong and counterbalancing India has been America's most important [China](#) play in the last quarter of a century. But Trump keeps going the extra mile to cast doubt on whether that still holds. Having claimed (falsely according to India) that he stopped India and Pakistan from going to war in May, Trump is going out of his way to woo Pakistan. On the same day in June that Trump invited Modi to Washington, he had a private lunch with Asim Munir, Pakistan's military chief. American presidents do not share one-to-one meals with heads of foreign armies. Yet for Pakistan he made an exception. Modi politely declined Trump's invitation. Now Trump is taunting India that it has a "dead economy" and might one day have to import its oil from Pakistan. This is how you lose friends and squander influence.

Taiwan has just as strong grounds as India to worry that the world is turning upside down. Trump has slapped 20 per [cent](#) tariffs on the world's largest semiconductor hub and accused it of ripping off America. Last week he denied Taiwan's president, Lai Ching-te, permission to stop over in New York for fear of offending China. Kissinger's stance of strategic ambiguity on Taiwan — that China could never bet on America not coming to Taiwan's aid — has been supplanted by tactical myopia. Trump is capable of bargaining away Taiwan's security to win trade concessions from China.

Is there geopolitical method to Trump's madness? Only in the crude sense that Trump respects China's sphere of influence and wants China to respect America's. Each big

predator has the right to roam in their section of the jungle. Trump wants Greenland and still covets the Panama Canal because he sees China encroaching on the Arctic Circle and the western hemisphere. But he shows little concern for China's neighbourhood. When the Philippines' president, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, recently complained to Trump that China is "unilaterally changing the world order", he was brushed aside. "We're getting along with China very well," Trump replied.

Xi has so many reasons to be grateful to Trump. The two most transcending ones affect the full world neighbourhood. First, Trump is ceding the great game in the global south to China. The destruction of USAID and Trump's tariff war on the world's poorest countries in Africa and Latin America are pushing those continents closer to China.

Second, as Adam Tooze has written, Trump is letting China win the industrial race to clean energy. He is also easing Joe Biden's restrictions on China's access to advanced semiconductors. Last year China added more renewable energy capacity than the rest of the world combined. Since January, Trump has clawed back US green energy subsidies and restored "drill, baby, drill" as the fossil fuel centrepiece of his presidency. This carbon nostalgia is China's biggest windfall of all. The world's future is being written in China. Trump is its unwitting co-author.

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