

Opinion **Geopolitics**

## How China could win the geopolitical game by default

Mercurial shifts in US foreign policy under Trump have left leaders of other countries baffled

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Donald Trump's boorish behaviour towards other countries presents an opportunity for China's Xi Jinping to assume the mantle of being the defender of multilateralism and free trade © Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

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Is China winning the geopolitical game? The US appears isolated as President Donald Trump attacks not just rivals but long-standing allies. Trump's boorish behaviour towards other countries allows Chinese leaders to act as the responsible adults in the room. China clearly wants to assume the mantle of being the defender of multilateralism and free trade, and the linchpin of a stable world order.

The reality is more complex. The rest of the world is wary of China's embrace. Beijing benefited from the rules underpinning the multilateral system, turning that system to its advantage. For instance, even as it gained access to worldwide markets for its exports, China kept its own markets mostly closed.

In two important respects, though, China *is* winning the geopolitical game. First, Trump is steering America away from the ideals and principles it once championed. Second, with China, at least other countries know exactly where they stand, in contrast to the whiplash from unpredictable shifts in the whims of the US president.

Trade and territory matter in geopolitics, but the current competition between the two superpowers is about something more fundamental: conflicting visions of the world and how best to organise a country's institutions and its economic, political and legal systems. The US paradigm of a market-oriented liberal democracy with an independent judiciary once stood in stark contrast to China's model of a command economy, with the Communist Party directly controlling all arms of government and the legal system.

However, Trump is now taking America closer to Beijing's vision of the world. He has directly intervened in markets, giving preference to companies and industries that curry favour with him and his family, and has even tried to micromanage financial decisions such as credit card interest rates. He has attacked official data as flawed rather than acknowledging the economic reality they portray. He has made clear his desire to control the central bank's interest rate decisions, like the Communist Party does in China. He has fired officials who don't show fealty to him and his policies. And he has used the legal system to take down political rivals.

Moreover, his administration has shown contempt for a broader vision of the rule of law, one in which even the government is subservient to the laws it creates. So far it has attacked judges who hand down unfavourable rulings as nakedly partisan, but not overridden their rulings. Still, some members of his administration would dearly love to ignore the courts altogether. This is akin to how the Chinese Communist Party stands above China's judicial system, which adjudicates property and contractual rights but does not challenge government actions and policies.

Trump's vision of a free press is of one that salutes his accomplishments and tones down criticism. Under assault from his administration, the press's role as an instrument for holding public officials accountable is eroding, as Trump seeks something akin to China's official press (which is all there is) that limits itself to extolling the leader's virtues.

In short, Trump is gutting the very institutions that separate Washington from Beijing.

Mercurial shifts in US foreign policy have left leaders of other countries baffled. Trump has undermined Nato and threatened to make Canada the 51st state. These countries have stood by America for decades, although Trump certainly has a point that the rest of Nato needs to shoulder a bigger portion of the alliance's defence budget. Close allies such as the UK and South Korea have not been spared from Trump's tariff bludgeon. It is not just strong-arm US policy but unpredictable shifts in policy — including attacking allies who share its values as much as rivals who don't — that are pushing countries away from America. China, for its part, is tough on its rivals, but its allies can usually count on its reliable support.

For all this tumult, though, it is an overstatement to claim that countries are going willingly into China's embrace as an alternative to the US — for China is still seen as a rapacious and untrustworthy partner. But China might triumph by default. Even if Beijing is not winning the hearts of other countries, its vision of a world order is gaining ground because America, rather than providing a principled and attractive alternative, is beginning to look more like China.

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