



RCAS Commentary

The Future with Trump Again

Sujit Kumar Datta

Deputy Director, The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS)

February 8, 2025

About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

Welcome to visit our website: <http://www.rcas.top>.

Address: 1507B, EASTCORE1, No.398, Kwun Tong, Kooloon, Hong Kong
Ph: 00852 2397 7886|Email: hkrcas@163.com|Web: www.rcas.top

The Future with Trump Again

Sujit Kumar Datta

Sino-U.S. relations have entered a new phase of uncertainty with the return of Donald Trump to the White House. Continuity from his first term is expected, but leadership changes could signal changes in American foreign policy as it interacts with an increasingly powerful China.



▲ China-US Focus.

Trump started strong and, at times, aggressively toward China, which responded with a plethora of tariffs and countercharges in the trade war that erupted. Officials in the administration described China as a strategic competitor that needed to be balanced as it rose.

However, the adage broke down in different areas. It added to economic tension but found its way into tech tension, military positioning in the South China Sea and arguments on human rights and democracy. Whether the hard-line, confrontational policies that characterized this era, from sweeping travel and trade restrictions to tit-for-tat tariffs, will remain transformative forces in the geopolitical landscape has yet to be seen.

These screeching, intertwined and clashing roles in business and competition — a sort of crossing of wires — are part of the inning-by-inning game of human conflict, collaboration and cooperation for these two giants in a complex geopolitical market.

Trump's first presidency was dominated by rising tensions between America and China, including a trade war, technology restrictions and a clampdown on academic exchanges. Such moves dealt a double blow to China's financial future, particularly in areas such as technology and manufacturing. A hallmark of Trump's administration was to attack China's economic and technological ambitions, and it appears that these aggressive policies can be expected to continue. The tariffs and embargoes on technology are meant to slow China in critical areas such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence and others.

Still, these same pressures also pull China toward a much greater focus on independence from external technologies and innovation, working hard to drive domestic innovation and domestic technologies, and to do so more rapidly. At the same time, the strategic competition between the two superpowers, as Trump finds his way back into office, will remain and perhaps deepen.

Moreover, in Trump's eyes, China is not just the biggest threat to the U.S. economy but to national security. At the heart of his campaign rhetoric on China was the "America first" policy, which demanded a more hard-line approach and kept the door open to expanded protectionist measures. But the reality is ongoing tension in the Indo-Pacific region, where the U.S. is expected to reinforce its partnerships with Japan, India and Australia to check the increase in China's military and economic sway.

Another potential area of confrontation is the Taiwan question. The Trump administration had already given a green light to arms sales and high-level engagement. These policies will probably remain in place, and possibly even intensify, in the second Trump term, pushing tensions across the Taiwan Strait higher and higher.

Despite the recent adversarial politics, the U.S. and China are deeply economically interdependent. They continue to exchange billions in goods and services each year, making China an important trading partner for the United States. The ramifications of decoupling would be colossal, not just for the two economies but for the global economy as well.

Trump will likely continue to seek reductions in the U.S. trade deficit with China and will repeat that America needs a level playing field in trade. Nevertheless, a full break is unlikely, considering the extent of economic entanglement. The focus may instead shift to diversifying supply chains, reducing dependence on Chinese manufacturing and promoting indigenous industries. If Trump follows through with additional tariff threats, expect China to respond by moving against U.S. companies operating there or adding duties on American goods coming in.

Worse, such financial countermeasures can exacerbate antagonism and prolong the trade war to undermine the global economy. Along with the global supply chain changing under Trump's America first policy, China might also diversify its trade partners with Asian, European and African countries.

Trump's second term will probably see the escalation of Sino-U.S. technological competition. Further restrictions on Chinese tech behemoths, especially in the area of 5G infrastructure and AI, will drive greater Chinese self-reliance in solutions development. Strategic decoupling in technology could generate two different spheres of influence, polarizing the relationship between the superpowers even more.

The South China Sea is ripe for further Sino-U.S. tensions. These are expected to include expanded naval patrols, joint exercises with allies such as Japan and the Philippines and show-of-force air missions. In response, China might bolster its naval forces in the area, together with regular exercises to exert state sovereignty. The potential for dangerous encounters at sea could increase, ramping up tensions and possibly causing an exchange.

If Trump maintains a NATO posture and sticks by his excessive defense spending agenda for NATO members, will this automatically play into China's hands? A divided NATO would weaken the U.S. in Europe, while China would make use of its economic power and the vision of the Belt and Road Initiative to expand its influence. Further, Washington's transactional form of leadership stands to push traditional allies into the welcoming arms of Beijing, thereby altering the global balance of power. Beijing's diplomacy toward ASEAN countries is likely to intensify across the Asia-Pacific region. In cultivating these relations, China wants to gradually balance U.S. primacy and establish stability to protect its own interests. By sidestepping America, initiatives show China as a responsible stakeholder and portray the U.S. as an unwelcome interloper.

These ideological shifts could complicate foreign relations, particularly with China. A more assertive approach may be perceived as a defense of Western values against the growing influence of Beijing. High-level communications, such as that of former U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, indicate the state of China-U.S. ties. The Trump-Xi phone call was a "compass" showing the direction of the relationship. This phone call represents the highest-level interaction between the two sides, indicating their profound understanding of the importance of Sino-U.S. ties and a positive attitude toward cooperation.

In this regard, hard as it might be, constant exchanges are necessary to clear up any miscommunications and build trust. Rivalry may define much of the coverage, but planet-scale problems offer opportunities to cooperate. Working together would also help alleviate global challenges such as climate change, pandemics and economic

stability that neither can solve alone. The unilateralism charge stemmed from Trump's abandonment of agreements such as the Paris agreement. However, in his second term, the realities of planetary management might drive cooperation on such fundamental issues. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, illustrated the need for America and China to work together on a global health crisis that would yield dividends for both nations.

A balance between collaboration and competition is necessary to make the Sino-U.S. relationship less unstable in the future. While competition for global business supremacy and trade issues are inevitable between any two great world powers, areas of cooperation such as climate change and the prevention of pandemics provide opportunities for collaboration. Bridging this gap requires a more constructive conversation between governments, academia and civil society to allow them to reach beyond mutual distrust and frustration through transparency and dialogue.

Second, active support for international regimes continues to strengthen multilateralism, enabling the two states to address shared problems and suspend unilateral moves that increase tensions.

Third, promoting people-to-people exchange — not least in education and culture — contributes to mutual understanding and counters the negative stereotypes that underpin distrust. Exchanges clear the pathway for a future of bilateral relationships that are far more secure and responsive to the needs of peace.

Goodwill and understanding are critical for keeping a neighborly peace, but wariness can be deadly. This balance between competition and cooperation is a delicate one that Trump will have to walk. While a rivalry on methods of trade, innovation and arms will perhaps remain, planetary problems are too heavy to disregard. Joint efforts must be encouraged. Trump's policies will define how the relationship moves forward and influence not just bilateral engagement but the broader international order. Despite their differences, both countries benefit greatly from stable and constructive linking and both countries suffer greatly from continued antagonism.

The next few years are crucial for determining whether Sino-U S. relations will develop into a new cold war or move toward a more equitable form of coexistence with competition and cooperation co-existing.

*This article was first published at China-US Focus, Hong Kong, February.7, 2025,
<https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-future-with-trump-again>.*

About Author



Sujit Kumar Datta is Deputy Director, Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong, and the former Chairman and Professor in the International Relations Department at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Dr. Datta graduated with a BA (Honors) and MA degree in International Relations from the Jahangiragar University and completed his PhD in International Politics from the School of Political Science and Public Administration, Shandong University, China. After that, he had worked at the BRAC Training Division (BTD) as a faculty member. He had joined in the department of International Relations, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh as a Lecturer in January, 2010. Dr. Datta has authored several articles and book chapters in renowned national and international peer-reviewed journals (Web of Science, Scopus indexed). Email:datta.ir@cu.ac.bd.