



RCAS Commentary

China Rises as U.S. Retreats

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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.

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The 2025 Munich Security Conference revealed a significant transformation in global power relations. While delegates for the United States argued in favor of their nation's increasingly isolationist policies, Chinese diplomats captured attention by outlining a vision of global collaboration and shared prosperity.



▲ In Munich, U.S. Vice President JD Vance said that the greatest threat to the Old Continent was neither Russia nor China but ‘the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values.’(China-US Focus).

The discrepancy highlights a significant trend: America’s withdrawal from global leadership, the result of President Donald Trump’s actions, has accelerated China’s rise as a dominant power. The U.S. retreat has led to vacuums in climate action and health governance, which Beijing has readily filled. Trump-era policies-his orders to withdraw from the Paris agreement, defund the World Health Organization and reduce humanitarian aid-have propelled China’s ascent and transformed the global order.

Trump’s order to exit the Paris agreement, the global treaty on climate change adopted in 2015, signals that neither he nor his administration cares about the climate crisis. The U.S. plays a massive role in greenhouse gas emissions and has been a sizable partner in global efforts to solve climate change. Withdrawal will jeopardize

progress on the reduction of greenhouse gases and undermine the ability of many countries to adapt to climate change. Clearly, U.S. leadership is lacking.

Bangladesh and other countries, for example, are currently suffering from rising sea levels, cyclones and floods. Trump is sending the wrong message to other rich countries who have played a role in climate change. The U.S. retreat from climate leadership provides China with a sweet opportunity to position itself as a global leader in climate diplomacy through its green and renewable energy investments.

The WHO has played a foundational role in global health governance, coordinating responses to outbreaks and organizing vaccine distribution. Trump's withdrawal from the WHO significantly limits the world's ability to respond to any new health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the importance of international cooperation in addressing health concerns. An American withdrawal from the WHO will likely result in gaps in funding and coordination.

But it will also pave the way for China to assume global health leadership. It may deepen its presence through the Belt and Road Initiative, potentially embracing health diplomacy by increasing contributions to the WHO and providing health assistance to impoverished countries.

One of the most dangerous of Trump's executive orders is ending U.S. humanitarian aid. The United States has been a top contributor for decades in helping desperate people with health needs. It has provided disaster relief, poverty alleviation and refugee assistance worldwide. Trump's cuts could trigger a global ripple effect, leading other countries to impose similar restrictions that could further exacerbate humanitarian challenges in conflict zones and impoverished areas. Weak anticipated leadership will permit China to step in to strategic assistance programs and encourage beneficiary nations to join its strategic agenda.

China is interested in taking on these roles as the United States steps back. It is ready to take on leadership through its Belt and Road Initiative, investments in green energy and greater involvement in global organizations. China is an important partner for growth in Bangladesh, providing money for projects in the energy and trade sectors. As the United States pulls out, China's presence will likely expand and have more impact, changing the power dynamics in areas Western countries have always assumed they controlled.

China's climate discourse conceals some inconsistencies, however. Despite its leadership in renewable energy, it remains the world's foremost coal user. Nevertheless, its commitment to achieve peak emissions by 2030 and the green energy projects of the BRI-such as hydropower in Africa-establish it as a realistic ally for poor countries. China's Health Silk Road expanded after the pandemic, with

hospitals established in Southeast Asia and training conducted for medical personnel in Africa. During the recent Munich Security Conference, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus commended China's "unwavering solidarity" and highlighted the notable absence of the United States.

By 2025, the Belt and Road Initiative will encompass 150 nations, with an emphasis digital infrastructure (5G networks) and green technology. European opponents warn of so-called debt traps, but speakers from Pakistan to Peru at Munich highlighted the BRI's significance in addressing developmental disparities. At the conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi characterized the U.S. withdrawal as "isolationism" and called for a world community with a shared future. In contrast, the speech of U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio touting "democratic resilience" was received with skepticism. German Chancellor Annalena Baerbock said, "Leadership necessitates presence, not merely promises."

Trump is moving toward doing things alone and pulling back from others, which puts at risk the idea of nations working together that was established after World War II. This could harm global partnerships and undermine international rules. The impact could be profound for emerging countries like Bangladesh. If such countries see U.S. assistance vanish in important areas such as climate change, global health and aid for refugees, they will be more vulnerable. Hence, the most important thing is to promote multilateralism in response to the Trump's abdication of global leadership. U.S. short-sightedness needs to be addressed by the international community so that the growing vacuum now hindering global cooperation can be filled.

Regional organizations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the African Union, can step up to proactively oversee coordinated measures to fight climate change, improve public health and deliver humanitarian aid. NGOs and international financial institutions must redouble their engagement, especially in countries where the politically driven realignments are most acutely felt-including the possibility of engaging with China as it becomes increasingly more global.

China's dominant role in international organizations and its massive Belt and Road portfolio offer developing nations a path to basic infrastructure and economic growth. But cooperation with China should also take place under the umbrella of common international standards.

The world must continue to engage with China constructively, pressing for greater transparency, environmental sustainability and human rights as the Asian giant pursues a new, more equitable and greener path. This type of replication-as opposed to copying-would be beneficial to states, international organizations and multilateral institutions as China becomes an increasingly constructive participant in global governance and development. This approach allows for the upside of such efforts

while minimizing the negative downside of exploitative practices through excessive power.

The focus must also be on building the resilience of developing countries to reduce their exposure to external shocks and the subsequent dependence on external assistance. The power dynamics between the U.S. and China is neither predetermined nor unalterable. Nonetheless, Trump's actions have brought a deterioration of U.S. influence, which China has skillfully capitalized on to change the nature of global politics.

To restore leadership, the U.S. must make international alliances, reenter climate and health agreements and address internal strife. Simultaneously, the global community is confronted with the choice of adopting China's transactional multilateralism or rejuvenating a rules-based system. As shown by this year's Munich Security Conference, the solution is not to select a hegemon but to insist on responsibility from all parties.

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About Author



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