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The United States and China: Ruptures and Realignments in Trump's First Six Months

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Donald Trump's election as president of the United States in late 2016 brought expectations of radical departures in US politics and foreign policy. Of all the candidates – Republican and Democrat – Trump was the most vocal on China during his campaign. His rhetoric swung from professing a 'love' for China to claiming that it is guilty of 'raping' the United States. Yet his unwavering appeal to right wing populism ensured that in the winner-take-all, zero-sum world he portrayed, Chinese gains were seen as the cause of American losses. Prior to the election it was widely expected that Hillary Clinton would come to occupy the White House, and that while her long-time political criticisms of China argued for modifications in Washington's relations with Beijing, she would in all likelihood have sought to broadly follow the path trodden by Barrack Obama. Where do we stand six months after the election of Trump? What has been President Trump's early approach towards China and what has been the Chinese response? What do the politics and worldviews of the Trump administration reveal about the balance of US-China relations today? Who in the Trump administration has been influential in steering China policy? And what do Trump's first six months in charge tell us about what the remainder of his tenure might hold for US-China relations? Ultimately, we find that within the bounds of US-China relations, Trump's first six months as president have been simultaneously of note and entirely unremarkable. His extreme political naivetes and idiosyncrasies have produced ruptures in the relationship, while competing

forces beyond his control have forced familiar realignments.

Turbulent beginnings

Throughout the modern history of US presidential campaigns, China has been utilised for short-term political gain. Ronald Reagan, George Bush Jr. and Barack Obama each pledged to toughen up on China before moderating their positions in office. To this extent, the China-bashing of the 2016 election was distinguishable, but only in its veracity and driven largely by Republican candidates seeking to out-Trump Trump on his hyperbole.[1] 'They suck the blood out of us and we owe them money', Trump once argued.[2] Donald Trump eventually won the presidency on the platform of 'Make America Great Again', with its foreign policy tagline of 'America First'. This came with such historically familiar commitments as labelling Beijing a currency manipulator and slowing the loss of manufacturing jobs to China. Trump's proposal to impose tariffs of up to 45% on Chinese imports had less historical precedent.

As president-elect in December 2016, Trump spoke to Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen, breaking decades of established protocol and challenging the stability of the so-called 'One China Policy'. So too did he suggest that US commitment to the policy – the bedrock of US-China relations – was no longer unconditional. Accordingly, Trump's entry into the White House brought an early stress test for US-China relations. Successive American presidents trod a path of cautious engagement with China[3], but it seemed possible that Trump would carve serious ruptures into the relationship and steer them into unfamiliar terrain. Indeed, during the early weeks of his presidency Trump sustained unusually pointed rhetoric towards China. He criticised Beijing for not requesting permission to devalue its currency and pursue its island building programme in the South China Sea; for removing 'massive amounts of money and wealth' from the United States; and for doing 'little to help' on the security problems posed by North Korea.

Ordinarily, such unfiltered accusations from a sitting US president would be expected to provoke more bitter indignation. Yet already Trump's controversial style had become routine. Foreign governments quickly recognised Trump's crude and outspoken remarks as the articulations of a politically novice businessman and reality television star more concerned with delighting his loyal audience than transitioning to judicious statesman. Nowhere was this more evident than in Beijing, which responded to Trump's rhetoric with palpable restraint; following Trump's conversation with Tsai Ing-wen, Chinese state media explained, with a hint of condescension, that the call reflected his 'inexperience in dealing with foreign affairs'.[4]

The "China problem" of past presidential campaigns, along with its proposed solutions, was made simple to resonate with voters; the inconvenient truth that US-China relations are a complex web of myriad actors, institutions and forces over which Washington has limited control is not easily sold to the electorate. For Campaign Trump of 2016 however, the China Problem was simple because it conformed to a narrow and generally crude worldview in which the United States had long been exploited by others due to the failures of the Washington Establishment. For President Trump of 2017, the complexities of the relationship

had not just to be repackaged to voters, but discovered for himself.

A reversal of history(?)

Trump's pride in his ability to strike deals and accumulate wealth makes him less willing to understand how the world works beyond the comfort of his business empire. Yet his introduction to the One China policy highlights the point at which business ends and politics begins which he and his supporters so keenly deny. For Trump, the policy was there to be manipulated through bombast and intimidation to win the advantage over a rival. For the Chinese government it is much more. It is a function of history, culture, sovereignty and national pride. The policy has no profit motive. It is not defined by stock value, liquidity or even GDP. There is no real estate to sell off or snap up. To accept Taiwanese autonomy, according to this view, would be to accept a return to the so-called "Century of Humiliation" of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, during which China was exploited by foreigners under the watch of imperial leaders who refused to engage with an evolving world they did not fully comprehend.

Today, China and the United States are both led by administrations which draw strength from nationalist fervour. But while China's (particularly economic) nationalism is often internationalist and outward-facing, creating and embracing global opportunities to further the cause at home, Trumpian nationalism is more insular, paranoid and defensive. It sees a world to be feared, defended against and kept out rather than grasped. Today's technocratic Chinese leaders are also increasingly skilled in modern diplomacy, and in Donald Trump they see an opportunity.

In February 2017, Trump retracted the threat to reconsider the One China Policy during his first conversation with Chinese president Xi Jinping. After meeting with Xi in March at his Mar-a-Lago resort, Trump announced that he no longer considered China a currency manipulator. In short, Trump bluffed with China but his threats were hollow and unconvincing and, in a reversal of history, Beijing outmanoeuvred Washington with more sophisticated statecraft. In *The Art of the Deal* Trump writes that, 'You can't be imaginative or entrepreneurial if you've got too much structure. I prefer to come to work each day and just see what develops'.[5] At Mar-a-Lago Xi quickly convinced Trump of the complexities surrounding North Korea to Beijing's advantage. Trump's famous praise for autocratic leaders like Xi with "strongmen" personas masks his own weaknesses; his unwillingness to operate within pre-defined structures and to look beyond the short term makes him unprincipled, manipulable, and liable to sudden shifts in attitude and behaviour. Trump admitted that 'after listening for ten minutes', he accepted that Beijing was not so easily blamed over North Korea.

Washington's infighting

Trump's aggressive but ineffectual posturing in the early weeks of his presidency revealed much to the Chinese leadership about how he might be managed over the next four years. It was also a demonstration that Trump's unorthodox bluster can represent little more than foaming surface ripples, while deeper and more powerful undercurrents retain control over the direction of travel. Indeed, over the course of Trump's first months in charge, US-China policy has increasingly aligned with the more traditional position carved out by the

presidential predecessors Trump derides for failing to protect the interests of the United States. In part, this has been because Trump formed a basic understanding of how the China Issue and its "solutions" are not as straightforward as he once imagined. So too was it born from the structural constraints of office.

Trump brought into the White House two campaign supporters and China hawks: appointing Steve Bannon and Peter Navarro White House Chief Strategist and Director of Trade and Industrial Policy respectively. Yet both have struggled for influence after entering the combative Establishment of Washington DC that Bannon in particular has long denounced. As largely unwelcome interlopers in the halls of American politics, neither boasts expansive networks of friends or allies and have thus always been vulnerable to attack. Navarro's trade prescriptions of heavily taxing Chinese imports and formally retaliating against Beijing's supposed currency manipulation have so far been dismissed, while Bannon – who declared 'no doubt' that the US would soon go to war with China – was removed from the National Security Council in April before being marginalised from Trump's notoriously defensive inner-circle.

Bannon and Navarro ascribe to, and reinforce, some of the worst fears for the US-China relationship. Some observers argue that the two are destined to repeat history by falling victims to the realist-inspired 'Thucydides Trap', by which the anarchical structure of the international system perpetually incentivises material competition, leading so-called great powers into spirals of mistrust and conflict.[6]

Yet the hyperbolic visions of Bannon and Navarro, along with those of their allies and followers, are additionally laced with neo-colonial rhetoric of the unacceptability and fundamental illegitimacy of China's growth and modernisation—in contemporary parlance, it's 'rise'. The Chinese 'come here to the United States in front of our face', Bannon argues of China's actions in the South China Sea which lies over 11,000 km from the mainland United States, but where the United States – by simple virtue of being the United States – is unproblematically imagined to hold a more justified and rightful presence.[7] Bannon and Navarro may yet regain favour, but Trump values loyalty in others of the kind which can now be provided by influential others capable of winning his trust.

Trump's Secretary of Defense, James Mattis and National Security Advisor, HR McMaster, for example, articulate assertive but more measured views on China which echo those of past administrations. Mattis dismisses the need 'for dramatic military moves' in response to Chinese actions in the South China Sea, emphasising diplomacy instead. McMaster presents China's territorial expansion not as uniquely aggressive but as an example of historically-recurring global challenges for which the United States should prepare itself. The new US Ambassador to China, Terry Branstad, is another foil to China's fiercest and most anti-Establishment critics, as the longest serving governor in the US history with cross-party support and strong personal connections to President Xi.

Rupture and realignment

The election of Donald Trump always suited Beijing's foreign policy aims more

than would that of Hillary Clinton. For decades Clinton criticised China's human rights record and, as Secretary of State in the Obama administration, she engineered the United States pivot/rebalance to Asia, a strategy interpreted in Beijing as a renewed effort to contain Chinese influence. China has recently indicated a willingness to provide global leadership if, as Trump has either indicated or declared, the United States withdraws from global commitments including the Paris Climate Agreement and free trade regimes.

This, more than simple military might or territorial conquest, is the type of great power status to which China aspires to consign its humiliations to the past: advanced, secure, and confident. Trump's first six months as president have given Beijing reasons to feel vindicated that he was the preferable choice. Trump expresses little interest in policing international human rights, and upon becoming president he withdrew the US from the planned economic pillar of Obama's rebalance from which China was excluded, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, leaving space for future Chinese initiatives. Trump's vulnerability to persuasion has brought additional rewards.

Nonetheless, commentators have recently begun to argue that the early "honeymoon" period between Trump and Xi may have ended. In June the Trump administration approved a multi-billion dollar sale of military equipment to Taiwan, shortly after imposing sanctions on a Chinese Bank with suspected financial ties to North Korea. In early July it became clear that Trump would also continue to permit freedom of navigation exercises by US vessels around Chinese-claimed islands in the South China Sea, to Beijing's renewed protest. Following ballistic missile tests by North Korea around the same time, Trump publicly lamented a lack of consensus with Beijing over an appropriate policy response, later asserting: 'So much for China working with us'.

Yet none of this should not come as a surprise. During his early years in office Obama cultivated increasingly positive ties with China's political elite, before an almost identical collection of issues - each with deep historical roots - tempered his ambitions for more collegial relations. Trump's approach towards North Korea in particular has quickly come to mirror that of Obama's; hard, sanction-led economic diplomacy combined with a reliance on Beijing to pressure its authoritarian ally continues to fail in restraining Pyongyang, while generating further discord with China.

Ultimately, while Trump's unorthodox style and worldview threatens to produce lasting ruptures in Washington's relations with Beijing, his idiosyncrasies have been at least partially harnessed to bring his policies on China into some alignment with those of the recent past. Nevertheless, the next four years of US-China relations will bring more unexpected developments, and Trump is arguably the most unpredictable and capricious US president in modern history. His sporadic outbursts of opinion may be accepted as the new normal in foreign capitals, but his erratic tendencies will remain a potential source of instability. Indeed, Trump's political inexperience and naiveties will mean that the Establishments of both Washington and Beijing will continue to play to his most prominent weaknesses, in pursuit of their own contrasting agendas. Combined with regular personnel

changes in the White House and Trump's as-yet unproven ability to respond effectively to real crises, the US-China relationship now stands on a far less predictable footing than it has been for much of the recent past, and one which brings the potential for further disruption.

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Endnotes

[1] Turner, O. 2015. *China and the 2016 US Presidential Debates: Curiosities and Contradictions*. Swedish Institute of International Affairs, UI Brief no.3, November.
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[3] Turner, O. 2016. "The US and China: Obama's Cautious Engagement." in *The Obama Doctrine: A Legacy of Continuity in US Foreign Policy?*, edited by Jack Holland and Michelle Bentley, 180-193. London: Routledge.
[4] China Daily, December 3, 2016.
[5] Trump, D. 1987. *The Art of the Deal*. New York: Random House.
[6] Allison, G. 2017. *Destined for War: Can American and China Escape Thucydide's Trap?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
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