



***HARRIS OR TRUMP: THE US' BROAD  
BRUSHSTROKES ON CHINA AND  
BEIJING'S PREFERRED CHOICE***

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*The following is the eleventh in a series on the challenges facing the next US presidential administration in managing the most crucial Indo-Pacific relationships. See part one in the series [here](#), see part two [here](#), part three [here](#), part four [here](#), part five [here](#), part six [here](#), part seven [here](#), part eight [here](#), part nine [here](#), and part ten [here](#).*

“Are we adversaries, or partners? That is the number one question for us,” President Xi Jinping queried President Joe Biden during his meeting last November at the Filoli Estate, a grand country house and garden set on rolling grounds in Woodside, California. Returning to the question five months later in his phone conversation with Biden, Xi asserted that the two sides needed to first get the “issue of strategic perception” right, “just like the first button of a shirt that must be put right.”

Be it a Harris administration or a second Trump administration, the first button is not likely to be worn as per Xi's liking.

The era of engagement in US-China relations has drawn to an unceremonious close and strategic

competition, including perhaps of an extreme variant, is here to stay. The operative question going forward, rather, is whether the two sides are capable of fitfully stabilizing ties by emplacing guardrails on the relationship, even as the negative tendencies in their relationship deepen. Or whether extreme competition will degenerate into outright strategic rivalry with the possibility of the bottom falling out of the relationship entirely.

Both a Harris administration and a second Trump administration's approach towards China is likely to feature many common elements. These include maintaining America's innovation edge over China; countering China's trade and industrial policy practices from distorting global markets and harming US competitiveness; promoting US values and counterbalancing Chinese models of government and influence operations; maintaining an intelligence advantage over Beijing; and, foremost, deterring China from the use of military force regionally. This includes denying China sustained air and sea dominance inside the first island chain in a conflict; defending the first island chain nations, including Taiwan; and dominating all warfighting domains outside the first island chain.

The philosophical basis of the common approach towards China derives from the Trump administration's National Security Strategy of December 2017. Having declared China a “revisionist power” that was engaged in “long term strategic competition” with the United States, the administration worked to redraw the region's ‘hub-and-spokes’ architecture into a four-cornered network featuring Washington, Tokyo, Canberra, and New Delhi as the “principal hubs” to preserve a favorable strategic balance over China. On the geo-economic front, tariffs were imposed on \$370 billion worth of Chinese imports and, after declaring that Chinese control of advanced technologies “pose[d] profound challenges to free societies”, the US' technology control regime was reimagined via an expansive ICTS (information and communications technology and services) rule that was trained initially on kneecapping the telecoms giant, Huawei.

The Biden administration's three-part approach to "invest, align and compete" against China is built on this foundation. Its punitive "small yard, high fence" controls—be it with regard to chips, supercomputing or connected vehicles—derive from the ICTS order. Trump's Section 301 tariffs have not just been retained but selectively increased too, not scaled down. The administration has also expanded domestic productive capacity in key strategic and high value-added manufacturing sectors, by introducing landmark legislation such as the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) as well as by imaginatively employing several industrial policy authorities, such as the Defense Production Act, Buy American Act and the Bayh-Dole Act. These industrial policy actions had eluded the Trump administration, and the climate change-linked measures among them might not be sustained in a second Trump administration, given the absence of Republican votes for the IRA.

Geopolitically, the Biden administration's strategy on China centered on crafting a bespoke "latticework" of trilateral and multilateral coalitions (rather than simply establishing a four-cornered architecture as was the case with Trump) to build "situations of strength" and dictate the terms of effective competition with China. Having assembled these coalitions (AUKUS, Quad, ROK-Japan-US trilateral, the Squad, deepened NATO-Indo-Pacific Partner (IPP) relationships) to shape the strategic environment around China, the administration has since the November 2022 G20 Summit in Bali sought to cement a "floor" under its working relations with Beijing. Disruption, rather than stability, had been the norm on China during the Trump years and is likely to be the case again.

The Biden and Trump administration brushstrokes are expected to persist in a Harris or a second Trump administration.

None of this pleases China. In its view, the Trump and Biden administration's strategies were intended to build it out economically, isolate it diplomatically, encircle it militarily, and suppress its development technologically. The networking of alliances, partnerships and unilateral groupings are an

accelerant of major power conflict than a building block for deterrence and stability, in its view. And expectations of change for the better, going forward, are minimal regardless of the victor on Nov. 5.

That said, a Harris presidency is handily the "lesser of two evils" insofar as China is concerned.

Building on the slow rehabilitation of ties over the past 18 months, China's hope is that the next president will consolidate the fragile stability in ties and institutionalize it to make the bilateral relationship more predictable. A non-disruptive external environment backed by a rough-and-ready coexistent relationship with the U.S. remains an essential ingredient of China's overarching #1 national interest priority—that being its re-rise and the fulfilment of its national modernization aspirations by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Harris is better placed than Trump to deliver on this point.

Second, as a general principle, China prefers continuity over change in government. Continuity allows for building-up of equities with the relevant leader and counterpart senior officials and enables for more predictable and stable interactions. Beijing would have preferred that Biden be returned to office, especially given his depth of knowledge of China and engagement with Xi. Harris, nonetheless, represents the next best option. Besides, Harris' pronouncements on China on the campaign trail have been light on detail. The less said over the public airwaves the better, in Beijing's view.

Third, as a general principle, in the post-Cold War era, China has tended to prefer Democratic Party presidents over Republican Party presidents. Indeed, the Clinton and Obama second terms were highly productive periods in the bilateral relationship, which is another reason that Beijing - even in this "new normal" era of US-China ties—would have dearly preferred Biden to have stayed on. Democrats, in Beijing's view, are more prone to taking a less adversarial approach towards the bilateral relationship and China's role in the world compared to Republicans. And now that the Republican Party has moved off its pro-trade moorings, the policy touchpoints on which China and Republican

administrations can find common ground has eroded considerably.

Finally, and relatedly, China holds deep reservations not so much about President Trump as much as a Trump administration. Trump is a known and, up-to-a-point, a manageable quantity, in Beijing's view. He is not necessarily anti-China in his political orientation and his transactionalism opens him up to opportunistic bargains that have to do with U.S. jobs, investment and exports. On the other hand, a second Trump administration will be brimming with new Cold Warriors irredeemably hostile to China. While the ceiling on ties will be low, the downside potential could be bottomless—and especially so if these new Cold Warriors are determined to embed Taiwan as the critical node in the US' great power rivalry with China. Beijing would much prefer that this proposition remain untested.

The US and China are fated to remain locked in an intensely competitive relationship over the next four year. Whether the two sides are able, or willing, to embed this competitive dynamic within a steadying strategic framework will have huge implications for the Indo-Pacific region and the world.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*