



## **IRAN CONFLICT—TRUMP PUTS ANOTHER DENT IN CHINA'S "CONFIDENT" FOREIGN POSTURE**

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Against the background of widespread harsh international criticism of Trump administration foreign policies, culminating with the US attack on Iran, Beijing has positioned China as the opposite of the “disruptive” [Trump government](#) with a confident, steady and firm approach to foreign affairs. Foreign [commentary](#) has often highlighted the contrast which advantages China.

Nevertheless, close observers of US-Chinese competition over the past year culminating with the Iran war, have seen [Trump policies](#), whether intended or not, repeatedly weakening China’s international standing. This process has occurred not in public discourse but notably among governments in the Indo-Pacific and some elsewhere. Based on my interviews and consultations with 250 regional specialists since July 2024 and the actual behavior of [the governments](#), the regional leaders have been more moderate than their media and public opinion as they pragmatically pursue their interests with the current US administration. The calculations of these governments are much more important than public discourse in determining their countries’ approaches toward China and the United States.

The sequence of Trump policies disadvantaging China over the past year starts with the [Trump government’s success](#) in leveraging the importance of access to the American market through the use of massive and widespread tariffs. Beijing’s call for Asian governments to align with China in [a united front](#) resisting the April 2025 tariffs fell flat in the face of the Trump government

implementing arguably the most impactful example of a power exerting influence in Asia in 2025. All major trading governments sought bilateral negotiations with the United States in venues and on terms set by the Trump government, attempting to ease the costs to them in exporting to the United States. These [talks and agreements](#) provided much better US access to foreign markets, large investments in the US, large purchases of US advanced manufactured goods and natural resources and commitments to assist the US lagging shipbuilding industry. Another major benefit for the Trump government was that the tariffs have provided substantial US government [revenue](#) to help pay for the growing US government spending deficit exacerbated by the passage into law in July 2025 of the massive appropriations and tax cuts seen in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

The changes engineered by the Trump government also radically altered the US administration’s view of close economic engagement with Asia. The administration moved from a stance seeing such engagement as [very adverse](#) to US interests to a position that the US now benefited greatly in growing trade and economic engagement with Asia. The positive US economic stake in Asia was the main rationale for the administration’s robust [national defense strategy](#) in Asia issued in January 2026. This turnabout had strongly negative implications for [Chinese](#) strategists who saw US economic decoupling from Asia as leading to overall US withdrawal which they anticipated would facilitate China leadership in the region. Meanwhile, current and anticipated Trump demands targeting defense spending and burden-sharing also will likely lead to allies and partner payments of significant benefit to the United States.

Trump’s success worked to US advantage in competition with China by undercutting China’s longstanding image as the region’s undisputed [dominant economic leader](#). The US economy has become a [lot more prominent](#) in the calculations of regional businesses, governments, and expert commentators. And China is comparatively less important, especially as a [consumer of regional exports](#).

Indeed, China’s weakness as a consumer of regional imports endures. It reflects stalled Chinese [consumer spending](#) unlikely to be revived soon on account of widespread [consumer uncertainty](#)

caused by fraught real estate markets, continued weak government social support programs for healthcare and pension expenses for the rapidly aging society, and consistently below market value interest payments on public savings accounts in Chinese banks.

Beijing leaders in the past two years also have been emphasizing foreign exports of Chinese manufactured goods to meet overall economic growth targets. As a result, regional and other foreign leaders and exporters restricted from US markets find that other world markets, including their own country markets, are often flooded with Chinese exports. Many Chinese exports have benefited from the enormous Chinese party-state protectionist industrial policies. [A bottom line](#) in the calculus of Indo-Pacific and other foreign exporters and their governments has been that China does not offer an alternative market for the goods they previously sold to the United States. Rather, making matters worse for them, Beijing is pressing ahead with selling the products it previously sold to the US to foreign markets in acute competition with other foreign exporters.

A related outcome negative for China as a result of the Trump tariffs is a clearer awareness among regional governments [shown in interviews](#) of how China's party-state-directed industrial policies aim to establish Chinese dominance in the production and sale of key manufactured goods. Beijing thereby weakens and often wipes out regional and other foreign competition through grossly unfair trade practices involving strong government support and heavy subsidies to produce high quality products selling at prices undercutting foreign competitors. This zero-sum [beggar thy neighbor practice](#) was followed by China in the past three decades., first in production and sale of steel and other metals; then solar panels, wind turbines and associated products; followed by 5G Information and Communication Technology and related products, and most recently in electric vehicles, batteries and supporting manufactured goods.

Another shortcoming negatively impacting China regional influence relative to the United States in the Indo-Pacific has been [China's firm, arguably rigid, position](#) in interaction with US allies and partners. In response to Trump's affronts, South Korea, India, Australia, and Japan have sought alternative paths to support their interests, including dialogue seeking improved relations with China. Beijing has welcomed the contacts and moves by these governments to compromise over their differences with China but Beijing has avoided compromising on its part. And it has lashed out against the Japanese prime minister.

A major driver for recent closer alignment with Washington by these important US allies and partners along with Taiwan and the Philippines has been the very negative pressures each of these governments have experienced with the Xi Jinping leadership seeking deference to Chinese preferences. As China's negative practices with these governments continue without Chinese compromise, the strategic need they have of close ties with the Trump government remains very strong. [Privately Chinese officials acknowledge](#) Beijing's wariness in the face of Indo-Pacific governments aligned with the United States now seeking better ties with China in reaction to Trump affronts. Some affirm that China's righteous policies should not be changed to accommodate these states seeking better relations. Others judge these states tended to "swing" in the past toward the US, and may be recently shifting

toward China, but they could easily shift back to the United States, to China's detriment.

Moving into 2026, Trump's actions weakened China's recent efforts to mobilize countries of the global south against the United States. Beijing challenging the US featured deeper [involvement in Middle East](#), with China posturing notably as a regional influencer as Beijing brokered a deal with Iran and Saudi Arabia and Chinese activism showed in various regional venues like the 2025 ASEAN-Gulf State-China summit. The efforts [reached a high point](#) in China's September 2025 massive military parade and concurrent expanded summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization highlighting close ties with North Korea and Russia and countries of the global south opposing the United States.

In contrast to that backdrop, Trump's egregious use of military force to abduct Venezuela's leader and kill Iran's leaders as well as his [military coercion of Cuba](#) have elicited weak Chinese responses demonstrating to these countries close to China and other Chinese "strategic partners" that Beijing's [posture with the Global South](#) means little if they face US coercive pressures. Notably, China has [stood out](#) in the Iran crisis not by leading international opposition against US military aggression but by emphasizing that Beijing would not allow the US attacks to upset its priority in a successful summit with President Trump.

In sum, the Trump government has been remarkably successful in advancing US interests in tariff negotiations with the governments of the Indo-Pacific, which are generally more calculating and moderate than the prevailing harsh international criticism of the many disruptions and affronts carried out by the US government. The process has dented China's reputation as Asia's unchallenged paramount economic power. Even when US allies and partners alienated by Trump's affronts seek improved relations with China, Beijing refuses to compromise its ongoing pressures on these states. In effect, Chinese behavior itself has become an instrument of American alignment—not through deliberate US strategy but because Beijing's own assertiveness continues to remind the region of what uncontested Chinese dominance would mean. Meanwhile, Trump's widely condemned military aggression in 2026 against Venezuela and Iran, and his [coercion](#) of and threats against Cuba elicited remarkably weak responses from China. Beijing clearly prioritized seeking stability in relations with the Trump government. The result undercut Beijing's reputation as a leader of the global south against the United States.

*The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to [rob@pacforum.org](mailto:rob@pacforum.org) for more information on how to contribute.*