



Issue

Brief

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From Engagement to Competitive Co-Existence: The U.S. and its China Challenge

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Beginning in 2017, the first Trump Administration steered United States (US)-China relations from engagement to competition. Thereafter, Biden largely built on this policy, while giving indications of moving towards a phase of “competitive co-existence”. Under Biden, the US sought to reassure China that it was adopting a strategy of “de-risking” and not “de-coupling,” and its goal was to adopt a technology export regime that would also serve the needs of American security. This brief aims to flesh out the Biden Administration’s approach to China, which serves as the backdrop to the policy of the incoming Trump presidency. At the time of writing this brief, Trump was signalling, based on appointments to relevant positions in his administration, likely substantive changes in American policy towards China.

Following a period of remarkable rise, China's economic growth is faltering, unemployment is threatening social stability, and externally, the country is facing a pushback against its export-oriented growth strategy. Beijing is also being challenged in the security domain.

The revival of the Quad in 2017 marked the beginning of a new phase in Indo-Pacific geopolitics, followed by the revitalisation of the United States (US)-Philippines alliance, the forging of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) forum, and the growth of India-US security ties. Over the years, the European Union (EU) has also aligned more closely with the US-led Indo-Pacific framework.

Given China's military and industrial capacity, coercing it into a particular course has never been feasible. The main challenge has been to manage its rise, just as today the world has to deal with its downturn, which could leave China in what is called the "middle-income trap."^a

China itself does not publicly acknowledge that it is being confronted by any fundamental problems, five years since President Xi Jinping declared, during the 19th Party Congress, that by 2050 the country will become a global leader "in composite national strength and international influence."¹ Its leaders believe that the country remains on its upward trajectory; that indeed, it is the US and other countries of the West that are facing systemic decline.

In the 1990s, most Western countries saw China's economic growth as an opportunity for engagement, and thereby fostered bilateral trade and investment. According to their assessment—which would eventually be proven naïve—despite the Tiananmen event of 1989, a more prosperous China would evolve politically and become more democratic. The West gave China an advantage by supporting its bid for membership to the World Trade Organization (WTO) without securing firm commitments on limiting state intervention in its economy or enforcing Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). China's WTO membership spurred a surge in Chinese trade, enabling it to surpass the United States as the world's largest trading nation by 2013 when its trade in goods passed the US\$4-trillion mark. China became not only the world's largest goods exporter, but a major FDI destination and a key player in global supply chains.²

^a This is a situation where a country's GDP per capita reaches a middle-level of income but for a variety of reasons it is unable to grow higher for the country to become a high-income country.

Introduction

During this period, China also emerged as a military power. Between 2000 and 2016, its military budget increased by approximately 10 percent annually.³ Officially, China's 2022 defence budget was around US\$230 billion, second only to that of the US, though experts estimate it may be understated by about US\$60 billion.⁴ In 2020, reflecting China's military power, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy surpassed the US Navy in fleet size.⁵ Programmes like civil-military fusion channelled China's rapid scientific and technological advancement toward strengthening the PLA. The military has since become more assertive, projecting power across Taiwan, the South China Sea, Doklam, and Ladakh.

From Engagement to Competition

As noted by Jude Blanchette, who holds a chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the strategic competition between China and the US now extends beyond the military and economic domains: “It extends into cyberspace, technological innovation, and even narratives that shape global governance.”⁶ This has led to a debate among American policymakers over whether the US needs to define “a clear ‘end state’ or simply manage this competition.”⁷

In 2015, the National Security Strategy (NSS) released by the Obama Administration declared: “The United States welcomes the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China that delivers benefits for our two people and promotes security and prosperity in Asia and around the world.”⁸ The strategy emphasised the need to “rebalance” American power and cooperation between the US and China regarding greenhouse gas reduction. The issue did become the subject of an important agreement in November 2014 and influenced the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015; as is well known, however, one of the first acts of President Donald Trump in 2017 was to walk out of the Paris Agreement.⁹

By then, the Trump Administration had shifted gears—the 2017 NSS highlighted how China and Russia were challenging American power and influence and aiming “to erode American security and prosperity.”¹⁰ It noted that for decades, US policy had supported China’s rise with the belief it would lead to liberalisation, but “contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others.” The NSS made it clear that the US would now collaborate with its allies “to contest China’s unfair trade and economic practices and restrict its acquisition of sensitive technologies.”¹¹

Equally significant, though slower, was the change in Europe’s approach. In March 2019, the European Commission issued a document recognising China as both a cooperation and negotiating partner, as well as “an economic competitor in pursuit of technological leadership and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”¹²

The US’s and Europe’s repositioning vis-à-vis China—from being a partner to a systemic rival—has led to an evolution in strategies. It started out, somewhat in a disjointed manner, with the Trump Administration placing high tariffs on Chinese imports. This quickly morphed to a regime of technology restraints, with successive measures aimed at denying China access to certain kinds of high technology.

In 2021, President Joe Biden initially followed the assertive approach toward China that had marked the final year of the Trump Administration. At the same time, however, the US was aware of the pragmatism in reaching out to China. In a virtual summit with Xi Jinping in November 2021, Biden told the Chinese president that the US and China “need to establish some common-sense guardrails to be clear and honest where we disagree and work together where our interests intersect.”¹³ As for Xi, he expressed hope that Biden would “return US policy toward China back to a rational and pragmatic path.”¹⁴

The Biden Administration continued Trump’s tariff policies but adopted a more systematic approach, while also intensifying US export control restrictions on China. In May 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted that, since Beijing was unlikely to alter its trajectory, the US would need to “shape the strategic environment around Beijing.”¹⁵ However, relations between the two countries entered a crisis after then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022. This led to a corrective shift, with the US adopting a more nuanced policy on engaging China at all levels.

The Biden Administration’s NSS, issued in October 2022, explicitly framed China as a strategic competitor. Building on and systematising Trump’s policies, the document referred to China as the “most consequential geopolitical challenge” confronting the US. It emphasised, “The PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly the diplomatic, military and technological power to do it.”¹⁶

The Biden-Xi talks on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Bali in November 2022 marked the first in-person meeting between the two leaders, reflecting an effort from both sides to manage their competition. The meeting restored diplomatic communications disrupted by Pelosi’s Taiwan visit. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi described the talks as setting “a clear direction which is to prevent China-US relations from derailing and getting out of control.”¹⁷ This diplomatic opening was derailed in January 2023, when a Chinese spy balloon flew over the US and was shot down. The incident prompted the cancellation of what would have been Blinken’s first visit to China.¹⁸

The progressive ban on semiconductor exports to China since 2022 has not only targeted military applications but also sought to restrain the country’s development as an economic power. The US has worked to persuade key allies

like Japan and the Netherlands to restrict China's technological advancement, particularly in the domain of Artificial Intelligence (AI).¹⁹ In April 2023, US National Security Adviser (NSA) Jake Sullivan described the approach as “protecting its foundational technologies with a small yard and high fence.”²⁰ He noted that these restrictions were carefully tailored and based on “straightforward national security concerns.”

The US approach was emphasised by Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen during her visit to Beijing in July 2023, the first high-level visit since the “balloon incident”. This was a move towards constructive engagement with China involving three points—safeguarding the national security of the US and its allies; fostering an economic relationship based on “fair competition”; and cooperation on urgent global challenges.²¹ In the October 2023 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, US NSA Sullivan emphasised concerns that China might use US technologies “against the US and its allies.” Consequently, he stated, “we seek to ‘de-risk’ and diversify, not decouple.”²²

The Biden Administration's China management strategy included revitalising American manufacturing. Key to this effort were two legislations: the CHIPS and Science Act (2022) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of the same year. The CHIPS and Science Act allocated around US\$250 billion to subsidise semiconductor production, encourage the construction of chip plants in the US, and revitalise science institutions. The IRA, meanwhile, estimated to be around US\$1 trillion to US\$1.5 trillion, aimed to accelerate the country's green transition and secure more green jobs.²³ Biden also focused on strengthening the Quad and creating a new Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF) to support the economic component of the US-led policy to contain China with a complex military, political and diplomatic framework.

On 15 November 2023, Biden and Xi held their second in-person summit in Woodside, California, on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting. Both sides expressed satisfaction with the outcome, which observers saw as consolidating the “guardrails” process of stabilising the Sino-US relationship. Biden assured Xi that the US does not want to change China's system nor support Taiwan's independence. Xi, in turn, assured Biden that China is not seeking hegemony nor altering the international order. They agreed to activate a hotline in the event of a crisis. Biden underscored the fact that while the two nations are engaged in competition, the goal is to prevent the rivalry from “veering into conflict, confrontation, of a new Cold War.”²⁴ The two sides gave their assent to restarting military-to-military communications, resuming counter-narcotics cooperation,^b collaborating on AI rulemaking, and expanding people-to-people exchanges.²⁵

b This is about getting China to crack down on the flow of synthetic opioid precursors from China which have resulted in the fentanyl epidemic in the US.

Amid the diplomatic engagement, the US has not ceased its “de-risking” process. In September 2024, it introduced new export controls on critical technologies, including quantum computing and semiconductors to China. These restrictions cover quantum computers and components, advanced chipmaking tools, semiconductor technology, specific metals and alloy components, and high-bandwidth chips essential for AI applications.²⁶

Throughout these developments, both China and the US have maintained that they seek cooperation on issues of mutual interest. The US has emphasised that its aim is not decoupling, but “de-risking” the relationship, with technology restrictions aimed at protecting national security. China has criticised the US approach. At the meeting of September 2024, Wang Yi said, “The United States should not always approach China with two faces: On the one hand, encircling and suppressing China brazenly, and on the other hand, engaging in dialogue and cooperation as if nothing is wrong.”²⁷ In essence, he captured the core of US’s China management policy.

However, Blinken’s remarks re-emphasised US policy as one of “using diplomacy to responsibly manage competition, to candidly discuss areas of differences.”²⁸ He highlighted the implementation of commitments made at the Woodside Summit, including cooperation in counter-narcotics, military to military communication and talks on AI.

The last meeting between Presidents Biden and Xi took place after the US presidential elections. In a sense, it was the swan song of the Biden period. What the future holds is not easy to forecast, although Trump’s Secretary of State and National Security Advisor designates are notable China hawks. The Biden-Xi summit on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in Peru in mid-November was also notable for the Chinese president’s message to the incoming Trump Administration, where he warned the US about punitive tariffs on China. In an emphatic readout of the meeting, Xi said that “a new Cold War should not be fought and cannot be won. Containing China is unwise, unacceptable and bound to fail.”²⁹ He added that China would continue to seek a stable relationship with the US and that he would work with the new administration “to maintain communication, expand cooperation and manage differences.”³⁰ Echoing what fundamentally was the Biden Administration’s policy towards Beijing, Xi said: “Our two countries cannot let any of this competition veer into conflict. That is our responsibility and over the last four years I think we’ve proven it’s possible to have this relationship.”³¹

All these changes have occurred within a changing global context. The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine reshaped international geopolitical dynamics, deepening the Russia-China quasi-alliance and strengthening Russia's ties with Iran and North Korea. Additionally, a new set of issues emerged from Hamas's terror attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 which has since escalated into a broader conflict now engulfing Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran.

A parallel development is that North Korea has now graduated from being a supplier of military products to sending military personnel to assist Russia. This development is not entirely to Beijing's liking as it feels that this will give the US the opportunity to strengthen its alliance with South Korea and Japan. Further, it undermines China's influence over North Korea, a country Beijing views as a buffer against the US-backed South Korea.³²

In a surprising move, China has shifted its stance towards Israel following the Hamas attack. Beijing had significant economic and technology-related relations with Israel, and China had been Israel's largest trading partner in Asia since 2013. But the Hamas-Israel conflict has altered Sino-Israel relations a great deal. China refrained from condemning the Hamas killings and later hosted a Hamas delegation. Furthermore, China characterised Iran's missile and drone attack on Israel in April 2024 as an act of "self-defence." Analysts speculate that China may be positioning itself as an alternative to the US in the region, seeking to strengthen its influence as a leader of the Global South. It is also a reflection of its strategic interests as a major importer of Persian Gulf oil.³³

The China-Russia Alliance

Russia and China have been linked with each other in recent times through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Brazil-Russia-India-South Africa (BRICS) platform.

On the eve of Ukraine war, Russia and China declared that their friendship "has no limits, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation."³⁴ The declaration was aimed at the United States and its allies. The two nations reinforced their position on key issues—Russia expressed support for China's stance on Taiwan, while China committed to opposing NATO enlargement. Despite praising democracy as a universal value, they criticised efforts from "certain states" to establish global hegemony and impose their own ideas of democracy.³⁵

China's growing tensions with the United States over the last five years, coupled with the sanctions imposed on Russia following the Ukraine invasion, have brought the two countries closer. As a result, Russia has shifted its economic focus eastwards, promoting the notion of Eurasian integration. China's development of railroads passing through Russia to western Europe support this vision. However, China remains aware that its economy is globally oriented, with significant trade relations with the US and EU. To safeguard its interests, it seeks to moderate any perception of hostility toward the west.³⁶

The EU-China Relationship

As mentioned earlier, the EU's stance toward China has gradually evolved. In 2021, the EU released a formal Indo-Pacific strategy driven by the need to safeguard its economic and security interests. American actions against China pushed the EU to adopt a supply chain strategy aimed at reducing dependence on China, a process described as "de-risking" rather than decoupling. The EU's strategies aligned themselves with those of the US, particularly on dual-use technologies in areas such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and quantum technology.

At the beginning of 2024, the EU adopted five initiatives to strengthen its economic security, without directly naming China. First, it strengthened the screening of foreign investment within the EU. Second, it called for better coordination on export controls. Third, it emphasised enhanced consultation among member states on the risks of outbound investment "in a narrow set of technologies." Additionally, the EU pushed for more discussion on supporting research and development (R&D) in dual-use technologies, and finally, it advocated for enhanced research security at both the national and sector level.³⁷

There is little doubt that the events in Ukraine and the evolving Russia-China relationship have influenced the EU's recent positions. The EU-NATO Joint Declaration on Cooperation, adopted on 10 January 2023, roundly condemned the Russian actions while implicitly and explicitly criticising China. It declared: "Authoritarian actors challenge our interests, values and democratic principles using multiple means—political, economic, technological and military."³⁸ In the following section, it acknowledged the growing era of strategic competition, emphasising that "China's growing assertiveness and policies present challenges we need to address."

Analysing the future of US-China competition, political science scholar Hal Brands observed that the American consensus views the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as seeking to make China the number one global power. Both the Trump and Biden administrations had abandoned the idea of integrating China as a stakeholder in the liberal international order. In other words, the two systems are locked in intense competition; the US, however, has yet to articulate a clear theory of victory or the desired end state they seek.³⁹

Brands identified two main schools of thought in the debate over US-China competition. The first believes in competitive co-existence, where the US could shape Chinese behaviour through a mix of incentives, while relying more on pressure and dissuasion to make Beijing a responsible stakeholder. The second school of thought contends that the rivalry would persist as long as the CCP remained in power, with competition serving as a longer-term strategy to encourage regime collapse. In his own realistic view, Brands suggests that the Sino-US competition would be resolved “through changes in Chinese power or in the way China is governed.”⁴⁰

In a recent analysis, *Bloomberg News* observed that US efforts to contain China’s push for technological supremacy were faltering. While the US and its allies had successfully slowed China’s semiconductor efforts, its ‘Made in China’ initiatives positioned it as a global leader in five out of 13 key technologies: unmanned aerial vehicles, high-speed rail, electrical vehicles and batteries, solar panels, and graphene. Additionally, China had already become globally competitive in semiconductors, AI, robotics, machine tools, drugs, LNG carriers, and large tractors. The only area where it remained behind was commercial aircraft.⁴¹

In such circumstances, it could be argued, as Brands suggests, that “competitive co-existence” is the more plausible future for the US-China relationship. At this stage, the idea of “regime collapse” appears far-fetched. [ORF](#)

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