

# A Retrospective Review of Sino-US Relations: Foreign Relations Strategies of Trump and Biden

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**Abstract**—This study used the methodology of a retrospective review to assess Sino-US relations and foreign relations strategies of Trump and Biden and found that while the Trump administration has ignited a trade war and a technology war with China, the stage is set for the Biden administration as to how it will handle Sino-US relations. We conclude that Biden is apparently tough on China and may counter the influence of China but will seek to maintain strategic cooperation with China on issues of mutual interest and there might be a renegotiation of the trade deal.

**Keywords**—Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Sino-US relations, US foreign relations.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE international political environment causes destruction upon President Trump initiating a trade war with China to fix an unfair relationship with China. But the crux of the problem is probably financial constraints in the US budget. Contrastingly, there is collaboration between the EU and China.

### *Aim of Study*

While the EU and China have enhanced cooperation, the relation between the Trump administration and China was logged in a tit-for-tat trade war. One wonders what the US-China relations would appear under the new administration of the Biden administration. This paper aims at analyzing the foreign relations strategy of the Trump and the Biden administration through the lens of Sino-US relations.

## II. METHODS

This study employed a retrospective literature review that integrates and compares evidence pertaining to the Trump and Biden administration and their handling of Sino-US relations to shed light on their foreign relations strategy amid the current political stalemate. With the use of retrospective review methods when assessing the available evidence, prejudice can be reduced and therefore inference could be drawn and best practices could be identified.

## III. RESULTS

### *A. US Foreign Relations Strategies in the Trump Administration (2016-2020)*

In the Trump administration, the focus of US foreign relations strategy was primarily unilateralism and counterterrorism. In his maiden speech, Trump declared his

America First approach to foreign policy and trade. Also, he emphasized “to unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism” [1]. A more confrontational approach to trade was adopted under the doctrine of America First, triggering a trade war and subsequently a technology war with China, escalating into a new cold war over ideology clash originating from economic nationalism.

### 1. Trade and Sino-US Relations

Trump launched the trade war with the world by levying punitive tariffs on the EU, South Korea, and Canada. The unilateral trade war indicates that Trump seeks to regain the hegemonic position in world economic affairs following the World War II in a bid to guarantee the national security of the US. To achieve this goal, he seeks to make sure that the US is the only beneficiary of any international treaty signed [2]. A case in point is the trade war with China.

Since he entered office, Trump attempted to affiliate with Beijing directly and met Chinese President Xi Jinping at Mar-a-Lago, where they assent to initiate an agreement involving 100 days to solve the difference in business. In the subsequent month, China assent to giving and taking: unfold its financial system to US business and utilities while granting Chinese access to bilateral trade. But then the US forced Beijing to offer more concessions and Beijing did not succumb to US pressure [3]. President Trump then launched the trade war to force China to execute important improvements to its trading system to correct supposedly unjust commercial exercises. Between July 2018 and August 2019, the US foisted taxes on around US\$550 billion of Chinese goods, and China fought back with taxes on around US\$185 billion of US products.

To complicate the situation, the Trump administration initiated a technology war with China. In May 2019, Trump forbade US companies to work with Huawei [4]. In June 2020, the Trump administration imposed visa limitations on Chinese students and scholars from China related to China's military-civil fusion strategy [5]. In late July 2020, the FBI arrested Chinese students who hid their associations with the Chinese Army [6]. Also, Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State said [6] that the US government had been considering banning TikTok. And the Trump administration hit Huawei workers with US visa restrictions. The complaint against China gets bigger as time goes by, with the US accused Chinese nationals of a hacking spree for military secrets and COVID-19 data. The technology war then escalates into a new cold war with the US abruptly ordered the closure of the Chinese consulate in

Houston. China responded with the closure of the US Chengdu consulate on July 24, 2020. In addition, the Trump administration also looked into cases of Chinese espionage, opposed China asserted ownership of the South China Sea, instigated cross-strait conflicts, sanctioned Chinese officials accountable for violations of human rights abuses and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) officers for undercutting HKSAR freedom, canceled Hong Kong's special status under US law and compiled an Entity list to sanction Chinese companies.

The trade war and the technology war incited fear among analysts that a new cold war has already started. The interpretation of China as a visible adversary is reaching across the ideological divide in the US, akin to the former USSR during the old hostilities, a universal and existential struggle between liberal democracy and communism. During the old hostilities period, the former USSR and US hardly had any economic or business contact. Today, the US and China are key economic partners. Trump had repeatedly talked about the potential of a total detachment from China. But a lot of US enterprises have operations in China and it would not be feasible for these companies to disconnect from the deeply entrenched logistics networks in China.

The old cold war was chiefly a competition in beliefs between the former USSR and the US, whereas the new hostilities were triggered by the free market contention between China and the US. Economic nationalism would win public support and obtain bipartisan support. While the old cold war with the Soviet Union could easily draw in democratic countries due to ideological divide, the new cold war with China, which originated from economic nationalism, might not be able to enlist many democratic countries [7]. Punitive tariffs aside, the democratic countries would also discern the cost and benefits of joining the US cause such as risking the vast business opportunities in China. Nonetheless, Trump had increasingly cast the conflict with China into an ideological divide, conjuring up a compelling story of a contest between liberal democracy and authoritarianism, which undoubtedly would draw in democratic countries to counter the influence of China.

## 2. The America First Goal, Unilateralism and Border Security Strategy

Trump told world leaders at Davos to put their citizens first [8]: Only when governments put their own citizens first will people be fully invested in their national futures.

Under the America First goal, the Trump administration had withdrawn from a number of international alliances, demonstrating isolationism and unilateralism in its orientation in foreign policy, including from the UN Human Rights Council calling the institution duplicitous, from NAFTA citing that it hurts American interest, from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCOPA), from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) citing harming American interest, from UNESCO for having an "anti-Israel bias" [9], from the Paris climate accord describing shouldering economic burdens, from the WHO for its preference for China. Trump also blocked appointments to the WTO Appellate body undercutting the international dispute

resolution system, in addition to criticizing NATO for its outdated mission and praising the British decision to leave the EU as "fantastic" [10], indirectly encouraging the dissolution of the EU. America First also extended to border control. And people globally strongly objected to the Trump administration's planned US-Mexican border wall [11].

## 3. Counter Radical Islamic Terrorism Strategy and Nuclear Proliferation Strategy

Under the Trump administration, the US killed the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran in October 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The initial mission of US forces posting in Syria was to conquer the territorial version of the Islamic State and this has largely been achieved. And the original US military goal in Afghanistan was to defeat al-Qaeda, not the Afghan Taliban. The US had largely attained its original objective [12].

On the nuclear deal with Iran, the Trump administration had been complaining that Iran has violated numerous provisions in the deal and applied sanctions against Iran. In addition, Trump had also killed Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani in early 2020. In November 2020, a top Iranian nuclear scientist was assassinated, with Iran claiming the killer was Israel and the US was partly responsible [13]. The killing would set off a chain reaction, possibly leading Iran to retaliate against Israel and the US, with Hossein Dehghan, a former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps vowing revenge [14]. This would complicate the precarious situations, making it difficult for the Biden Administration to return to the nuclear deal with Iran. On nuclear program of North Korea, Trump had touted how the US administration handled the North Korea nuclear program. He regarded Pyongyang's cessation of tests on nuclear and long-range missile tests a step in the right direction of conflict de-escalation [15]. The Trump administration took the risk of inciting hatred among the Iranians but nonetheless he attempted to solve the nuclear threat of North Korea.

## B. US Foreign Relations Strategies in the Biden Administration (2021-2024)

US foreign relations strategies under the Biden Administration focus on the US global leadership through multinational institutions, which depart from the Trump administration's emphasis on the American first approach to foreign policy and trade. Broadly speaking, the Biden administration focuses on combating coronavirus and climate change, while coordinating more closely with democratic countries to solve global problems, in contrast to the Trump administration's unilateralism and isolating oneself from most multinational organization, seen as not serving to US interest.

### 1. Trade and Sino-US Relations

On trade, Biden reverses Trump's policy of protectionism, citing that protectionism led to World War II [16]. Biden also opposes to Trump's tariffs and his tariff wars with the world. Here, Biden supported rolling back taxes on US partners like Japan, South Korea, and the European Union. Biden said he would instantly evaluate all of Trump's commercial practices and called the former head of state's approach to taxes as being myopic and devastating. Biden said: "I will use tariffs when

they are needed, but the difference between me and Trump is that I will have a strategy – a plan – to use those tariffs to win, not just to fake toughness” [17].

Despite Biden called Trump’s extensive taxes inconsistent and counterproductive; Biden called for target reprisal for unfair trade practices using present international trade provisions. Biden and Trump see eye to eye on issues relating to China’s twisting global trade regulations, aiding Chinese companies, showing prejudice towards US companies, and compromising their copyright. And the US lost over one million manufacturing jobs due to China. Biden would work with allies to counter the influence of China. He has attempted to reinstate the US as a dominant power in the Pacific by expanding the US navy activities in the Asia-Pacific region and is seeking to form a united front with states including Australia, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea to make China knows that the US will not surrender.

Similar to Trump that had serious concerns over Chinese technology companies, Biden also has a real worry about how TikTok manages data from its 100 million users in America. Biden said: “God only knows what they’re doing with the information they’re picking up off of here. So as president, I will go into it very deeply I’ll get the cyber-experts in with me to give me what is the best solution to deal with it” [18]. Also, Biden said on February 2020 [18] that he would approve to forbid using Huawei equipment in the US, pledged up to date penalties against Chinese companies that stole US technological innovations, adopting the same position as the Trump administration. Therefore, a technology war might continue under the Biden administration and the administration is likely to remain crackdown on China’s high technology such as Huawei, but tariffs on daily necessities that hurt American people might be scrapped and there might be some loosening of chip sales to Huawei in the US.

## 2 Reset of Sino-US Relations after the Trump Administration

There might be some possible ways to alleviate the tension between the US and China, preventing the Thucydides’ trap. China and the US need to engage in dialogues to manage their differences and improve cooperation [19]. There should be a high-level strategic dialogue, such as the existing Comprehensive Economic Dialogue initiated by former President Obama and Hu Jintao in 2009. Such dialogues should cover an extensive range of bilateral, territorial, and worldwide present and interminable tactical and economic interest, including issues like cyber theft and new rules for the internet [20].

Engaging international cooperation to solve bilateral differences is also a viable option. An example is the Six-Party Talks on North Korea and Xi Jinping’s support for penalties against North Korea for its tests on ballistic missile [19]. During the first cold war, the US was able to seal a deal with the former USSR on the security of European countries. Similar arrangements can be made such that China and the US would get down talking via multilateral platforms like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC). The APEC may be a good place to cover trade and technological issues.

The US and China can restore trust with confidence-building measures (CBM) [19]. Similar success cases were China’s agreement to CBM with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan during the 1990s in the negotiation of land borders upon the dismemberment of the Soviet Union [21]. Moreover, in 2014, China and the US concluded a Memorandum of Understanding on the informing of military activities as a CBM [22]. CBM can be a viable platform to sort out the difference between the US and China. CBMs are incorporated into Preventive Diplomacy (PD), which is a broader, proactive approach to mitigate conflict. This approach can prevent disputes from escalating into an armored confrontation [19]. PD originated from the former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and can be operated at the strategic or operational level to help to iron out the difference between the US and China [19].

The decoupling that US has initiated in the technology realm during the trade war with China signals that a limited form of decoupling might help to mitigate the conflict. Some degree of economic separation cannot be avoided, to be replaced by enhanced regional cooperation to fill the void. In addition, an up-to-date construction and regulations for the governance of high-tech and technology innovation might be helpful to improve the administration of such technologies [19]. For example, the inter-sessional meeting on ICT Security, co-chaired by Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia belongs to a multidimensional exercise that can develop cyber technology CBMs to sort out the difference between the US and China [23].

Finally, enlisting the support of the EU or Saudi Arabia as the peace broker may be a viable option. China and the US are the top trading partners of the EU, and the EU has a vital stake in the US-China rivalry. Although the EU might not want to get caught in the crossfire, it is in the best interest of the EU to step in and broker a peace agreement between China and the US lest its economic interest might be adversely affected. And Saudi Arabia, a long-term ally of the US and China, might serve as a middleman in the peace process. Just as former US President Bill Clinton orchestrated a peace summit between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat in 2000, a similar device may be useful to bring the US and China to the negotiation table. And China may take a proactive role in wooing North Korea back to the negotiating table of nuclear disarmament, by virtue of close military ties with North Korea in addition to encourage the Iranian leader to work with the US administration on nuclear nonproliferation. China has forged trade and military ties with Tehran and can exert pressure on Iran to work with the US administration. In other words, Beijing is in the best position to broker a peace deal for Iran and North Korea. That would overcome the impasse and relieve the burden of the US administration. If Beijing is willing to become a peace broker for the Korean peninsula and Iran, then hopefully the US administration will reset ties with Beijing and relax the sanctions imposed on China. The bottom line is that both the US and China should set aside differences and focus on issues of bilateral cooperation in nuclear proliferation, climate change, and COVID-19 vaccine to build up trust and respect. The US needs to accommodate a rising China and

China might need to continue purchasing more US federal bonds. Cooperation is the key to success and conflicts are destructive.

### 3. The US as a Global Leadership Goal and Embracing Multilateralism Strategy

In contrast to Trump's American first approach and pursuing unilateralism in foreign affairs, Biden champions US leadership in global problems by embracing multilateralism in advancing the goal of American leadership. By committing to the multilateral and international organizations, such as NATO, reaffirming US commitment to collective defense, supporting the persistent unity of the EU, and rebuilding cohesiveness among G-7 nations, Biden has worked in contrast to Trump's attempt in refuting US commitment to NATO, promoting the dismemberment of the EU and undercutting the coherence among the members of the G-7 [24]. In addition, Biden reverses Trump's decision to exit from the U.N. Human Rights Council and rejoin it to underlie US commitment in championing liberty and democratic system worldwide. In particular, Biden planned to hold a summit for global democracies, representing a shift in US foreign policy orientation from isolationism to democratize globalism [16].

### 4. Becoming a Global Leader in Climate Change and Global Health Strategy

On climate change, Biden reversed Trump's decision to pull out of the US from the Paris Agreement on climate change and rejoined the agreement to become the leader in global climate change. He proposed a US\$2 trillion climate plan and committed the US to hold the increase in mean worldwide temperature to 1.5 °C and the globe have to bring down carbon dioxide releases by 7.2% yearly through 2030 [25].

Biden restores US leadership in worldwide health system by reversing Trump's decision to leave the World Health Organization (WHO). Restoring full US associateship in the WHO, Biden would also strengthen the UN's worldwide healthiness organization by reinforcing its authority and building up its capabilities [25]. Biden has a pandemic plan of three ways: a health reply, a business reply, and a worldwide reply. The plan has communized the coronavirus reply, instead of assigning it to state government as in the Trump administration. His plan proposes a communized emergency response that offers free testing and expands hospital capacity by designing provisional medical institutions, in addition to accelerating the development of vaccines and other treatments and ordering wearing masks in public [26].

### 5. National Security Strategy

On national security, the Biden administration attempts to end wars in the Middle East, reinstate and rejoin the JCPOA, Iran nuclear agreement to reassert the US as a world leader [27], conserving the Russian arms agreement, and decreasing the stockpile of nuclear weapons and Federal financial estimate. On Iran, Biden defended the nuclear deal that Obama's administration had negotiated. If Iran goes back to abide strictly by the deal, then Biden would return to the deal [15]. Biden overturns Trump's troop withdrawal from Germany [28] and

emphasizes combating terrorist revolutionary net overseas utilizing minimal numbers of US special mission forces and belligerent airstrikes instead of dispatching a large number of troops [29]. On North Korea, Biden intends to keep US and UN sanctions in place, rally the support of China and Russia to tighten their impositions to pressure North Korea to return to negotiations [15].

## IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Biden administration has adopted the position of multilateralism, championing America as a global leader, in contrast to Trump's administration upholding the mantra of America first, with a unilateral and sovereign mindset. This has implications for the US' global orientation and has key inferences for worldwide collaboration on climate issue, healthiness and national security, relations with democratic countries, and trade with China.

The Trump administration exited from key global treaties, such as the TPP, Obama's signature trade deal, which was to connect over several countries from Canada and Chile to Australia and Japan in a nexus of commercial regulations, originally intended to bind the US to East Asia and make a commercial barrier against a budding China [30]. Such an exit reduces US power in the Asia Pacific region. Another Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris treaty on climate action was dubbed by the British newspaper, The Guardian: "Trump order signals end of US dominance in climate change battle" [31]. The withdrawal of the US has opened a path for cooperation between China and the EU. Here, the most successful joint declaration on June 2, 2017, and expressed in a series of assemblies of the G8 and G20 during 2017, sealed EU-China partnership on global effort to combat climate change [32].

As the US retreats, China moves forward to the forefront to fill the leadership vacuum [32]. On January 17, 2017, China's President Xi Jinping in his thematic address to the World Economic Forum in Davos, endorsed globalization and promised that China would try to turn out to be the champion of worldwide collaboration. Forbes had carried the headline "Communist China Is Now the Leader of the 'Free Trade' World" [33]. And in the coronavirus pandemic, the Trump administration blamed China for the spread of the virus while China used the outbreak to uplift its reputation as the global leader in a worldwide combat against the coronavirus by committing US\$20 million to the WHO to foster the development of public health system in impoverished nations [34].

China exerts huge influence in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, RCEP, as a rule shaper, drawing nations into the Chinese sphere of influence. Effectiveness in the supply chain will enhance the attractiveness of the region and promote foreign direct investment, enabling China's flexibility and bolster China's resistance to the fallout of trade tensions with the US and decoupling [35]. Hassan, a professor of Geostrategy at the Malaysia Technology University, said: "Lower tariffs coupled with a massive market share will be a huge advantage for RCEP members to be part of a crucial supply chain, especially post-pandemic. The region is considered a catalyst to

the world geopolitics and with China in the driver seat via RCEP, not only economic issues come into play, but also geopolitics and this puts China in the lead compared to the US" [36].

Apart from the RCEP, China also reaps geopolitical wins in the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement. One commentator said, "the ASEAN-China agreement is essentially politically motivated" [37]. China is pursuing to metamorphose its commercial success into realpolitik clout by practicing full-grown, practical, and accountable diplomacy with exceptional political influence, resources, and military strength [38]. China's chief geopolitical objective is to ensure diplomacy faith with its Southeast Asian neighbors so as to ensure regional security [39]. China aims to expand its political authority through harmonious commercial exchanges and collaboration [40]. In his December 2003 visit to the US and during a speech at Harvard, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao reaffirmed its American counterpart that China has been implementing peaceful ascendancy and needs a peaceful international development to guarantee a stable domestic development [41]. Here, trade is considerably more than just an interchange of goods and services. Regional commerce is a tool for affecting the balance and international equilibrium among nations and has an impact on governmental and commercial reorientation [42]. A case in point is the Belt and Road initiative (BRI). According to Elizabeth C., Economy of the Council on Foreign Relations, the BRI "serves as pushback against the much-touted US pivot to Asia, as well as a way for China to develop new investment opportunities, cultivate export markets, and boost Chinese incomes and domestic consumption". Under Xi, China now actively seeks to shape international norms and institutions and forcefully asserts its presence on the global stage [43]. Beijing wants to be equal to U.S. military competencies by 2035 and overtake them by the middle of the century, General Milley says, reflecting worries in the White House report [44].

Technological prowess has also captured US attention. China space program had a major achievement when its Chang'e5 lunar mission landed on the moon. Goswami, an Indian defense expert said that Chang'e 5 would enhance "their (China) understanding of rendezvous and docking, especially when they are planning on human landing" [45]. One important lunar resource is helium-3, which can be utilized for nuclear fusion fuel. Helium-3 is scant on the Earth but it has an abundance on the moon and in the future extractions of helium-3 can replace oil and coal to solve the world's energy crisis [46]. And China has recently successfully activated its "artificial sun" nuclear fusion reactor unequalled, the largest and state-of-the-art nuclear fusion research device in China. The HL-2M Tokamak reactor unbolts a mighty clean and sustainable energy source that has commercial applications [47]. Moreover, China has just started the most robust quantum computer worldwide, which is able to finish one task "100 trillion times faster than the world's fastest supercomputers" [48]. Finally, the Chinese Academy of Sciences lately announced major achievements. Graphene single crystal technology broke the barriers of the past and ushered in a breakthrough. This technology not only can help the chip to reduce the signal processing time by 1,000 times but

also it can even be used to make terahertz radars in the future, which in a real sense is rewriting the US' advantages in this field [48].

Amid a rising China, the Biden administration has stepped back into the international arena and Biden reiterates that he would consolidate US alliances with key partners in the west and the Asian Pacific to counter the influence of China. The cold war with China, as in the Trump administration, will be replaced by a competition approach in the Biden administration. In other words, Biden will team up with allies to counter the influence of China, albeit in a less confrontational way as exemplified by the Trump administration as it triggered the trade war. But the struggle for technological dominance of 5G technology will continue in the sense that the rivalry between China and the US on the technology front will continue. Coupled with the anti-China dominant view in the US [40], the Biden administration would be tough on China. Apart from trade, there are complicating factors including cross-strait relations, the HKSAR, and Xinjiang issues that would impinge on the Sino-US relations. Biden might rekindle the trade agreement, the TPP initiated in the Obama administration in a bid to isolate China and geopolitical space. And yet, times have changed, there are myriad domestic challenges faced by the Biden administration. And assuming office in January 2021, Biden is facing a tough task of fixing the US economy and repairing the ties with Western and Asian Pacific countries that are his first priorities in the policy agenda. And therefore, in the short run, Biden might delay his plan to revive Obama's pivot in Asia plan to rein in China. However, after the dust is settled, Biden would become tougher on China, upon consolidating alliances and repairing the US economy. The only hope is pinned on Biden's apparent respect for international rules such that some of the tariffs deemed unreasonable by the WTO might be scrapped. And the whole world is watching the changes in Sino-US relations in a Biden administration amidst a more strategic EU-China partnership and a rising China.

TABLE I  
SINO-US RELATIONS: US'S FOREIGN RELATIONS STRATEGIES UNDER TRUMP AND BIDEN

	Trump administration (2016-2020)	Biden administration (2021-2024)
Strategies	1. Adopting unilateralism strategy 2. Maintain border security strategy 3. Against radical Islamic terrorism and nuclear proliferation strategy	1. Becoming a global leader in climate change and global health strategy 2. Embracing multilateralism strategy 3. National security strategy
Goals	America First	World leader solving the global problems
Sino-US relations	1. New cold war 2. Trade war 3. Technology war	China as a serious competitor but US is ready to work with China

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