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# Changing trajectory of China–U.S. relations Background of current disputes

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of the article is to analyze basic documents and statements on bilateral relations by both U.S. and China's authorities. Main objective is to present a background for the U.S. – China relations based on analysis of these documents as well as political statements and experts opinions. Current misunderstandings between U.S. and China are mainly based on internal reasoning in order to secure the support of base electorate (Donald Trump) or keep alive the ideology of build-up and rejuvenation of a Chinese nation (Xi Jinping). Based on these assumptions the short-term perspective is rather negative with self-winding perspectives because of Trump's determination and Chinese leadership growing feeling of necessity of a tougher response. The long-term perspective cannot exclude the possibility of reaching a compromise due to the transactional nature of Trump's policies and China's determination to keep the economy reforms standing which is impossible without U.S. involvement.*

**Keywords:** *U.S., China, relations, economy, politics, trade, investment, Asia, rivalry, power*

## **1. Introduction**

“For decades, U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China's rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China” (Trump 2017, p. 25). That general, statement on up to date American policies towards China was one of the opening lines in the U.S. National Security Strategy published in December 2017 under

D. Trump's administration. The whole administration's attitude towards China is based on the opposition to meaning of the sentence quoted above. For D. Trump and his administration China is currently a "main rival" and point of reference of major U.S. foreign policy objectives which are not oriented towards integration and cooperation but rather containment and delimitation.

The purpose of this article is to analyze basic policy foundations of current relations between U.S. and China. It is rather not to describe the current state of these relations, events happening and decisions being made but analyze what is the policy making base for decision makers from both sides. Special emphasis will be put on analysis of main U.S. foreign policy documents published within last 5 years, especially comparison between the agendas of president B. Obama and president D. Trump. What is the motivation behind current change, reorientation of Trump's policy and what are the links between the foreign policy aspects and internal affairs in United States? Whether there is/was a difference of opinion on China between administrations or is it just a difference of foreign policy instruments and methods used? How this will influence the international affairs environment?

Main document analyzed here is the National Security Strategy published under both administrations: president Obama in 2015 and president Trump in 2017. Both provide reader with a broad overview of certain goals of U.S. policy towards China also in connection to relations with other East and South East Asian states. The article also reviews vice president's M. Pence speech delivered at Hudson Institute in October 2018, as well as the U.S. – China Congressional Report published in November 2018.

Suitable analysis in the article requires also an evaluation of Chinese policy towards U.S., the way it changed since the beginning of Trump's term in office and developed afterwards. Analysis is mainly based on chairman Xi Jinping speeches, his foreign policy statements as well as other officials declarations on relations with U.S. Analysis also includes ideas and views on U.S. – China relations delivered by important Chinese experts on international relations e.g. prof. Wang Jisi (Beijing University) and prof. Yan Xuetong (Tsinghua University).

## 2. U.S. policy framework

The National Security Strategy published in 2015 under the B. Obama's administration was a clear reflection of Obama's "pivot to Asia."<sup>1</sup> The document not only described policy towards China but also put it into the context of relations with East and South East Asian states. As one can read there: "In particular China's rise, significantly impact the future of major power relations" (Obama 2015, p. 4). Obama's policy presented in the document was not confrontational – with a direct passage in the strategy saying: "we reject the inevitability of confrontation" (ibid., p. 24). The main accent was put not on containing China but rather strengthening cooperation. U.S. suggested there a dual-approach policy. On one hand it welcomed the rise of a stable, peaceful and prosperous China and expresses a belief that relations should – in the first place – be constructive. Obama's administration identified certain topics as platforms of possible cooperation: climate policy, economic growth and the denuclearization of Korean Peninsula. On the other hand U.S. underlined the possibility of conflict but – due to the political expectations of keeping the dialogue with China open (and ability to preserve communication and exert influence) – still left some space for cooperation, with hopes for future, possible modification in China's policy. Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)<sup>2</sup> was clearly identified in the document as one of the important U.S. economic instruments of cooperation with regional states and – in the same time – confirmation of U.S. commitment to the region as a counterbalance to China's economical superiority in South East Asia. The strongest message (but still not without passages on cooperation) which was included in the strategy mentioned the situation on South China Sea. U.S. strongly underlined the capability to ensure the free flow of commerce and deter those who might contemplate aggression – a clear reference to China but without directly mentioning its name. Cybersecurity aspect was also mentioned in NSS but rather softly with two, three sentences and cautious wording which avoided direct accusations towards China. U.S. repeated and confirmed the previous commitments to safeguard its national

1 "Pivot to Asia" – a term to describe a change in U.S. foreign policy under Obama administration. It characterizes more efforts and policy initiatives towards the Asia-Pacific region with special emphasis on East and South East Asian countries.

2 Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) – a trade agreement between United States, Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam signed on 4 February 2016 but not ratified by US and as a result not activated.

interests and need to “take necessary actions to protect (...) businesses and defend (...) networks (...) whether by private actors or the Chinese government” (ibid.).

Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election in November 2016. In January 2017 was sworn in and became the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. The new president’s term was no different from his campaign announcements in relation to China policy. It started with “an earthquake” and then situation got even worse (from China’s perspective). The campaign announcements made by the candidate himself and his trusted advisors did not let observers (China authorities included) any doubts on his policy goals and attitude towards China (Stracqualursi 2017). Even though the substance of these concerns was not entirely different than previous administrations but the candidate and then the president addressed these issues with temper and radical formulas of solutions. Still, in the transition period the president – elect already caused controversies with China because of an exchange of congratulatory calls with Tsai Ing-Wen, Taiwanese president (Philips, Smith, and Woolf 2016). Afterwards the relations were soothed especially during the bilateral high level visits (chairman Xi Jinping to U.S. in April 2017 and president D. Trump to China in November 2017) but still the uncertainty of a future of U.S. – China relations remained, especially on Chinese side.

The policy direction and orientation of U.S. in relations with China was included in the National Security Strategy, published in 2017. It provided the public and administration with a clear understanding, profile and determinants of practical implementation of current US policy towards China. The ongoing trade disputes (rather inaccurately called “trade war”) and predominance of negative aspects in the relations are clear examples of implementation of these policies. Trump’s administration in these documents leaves no doubt on its negative evaluation of relations with China and notifies the existence of problematic issues with also a change of methods in how to solve the problems. The aspect of cooperation is still included in the NSS (mostly due to the transactional and business nature of Trump’s policies) but administration and president himself describe relations with China rather from the perspective of inevitable confrontation. The diagnosis in the documents follows the design of generally observed need to actively contain China in all the possible global aspects in order to keep U.S.’s status as the only world’s superpower. It is reflected by dominant unilateral approach in the strategy. U.S. seeks no allies or major partners in dealing with China’s rise. But it would be too far to say

that this is a reflection of an isolationist policy – U.S. attitude is rather self-centered with shortsighted vision of its interests with transatlantic cooperation or EU partnership's as not able to strengthen the capabilities of achieving American interests. It is not a hostile attitude but a very low evaluation of EU's and other partners political power.

Policy decisions and messages which are constantly publicly distributed by Trump's administration (in the context of tariffs towards EU, policy reorientation towards Israel and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, rejection to ratify the TPP, rejection to join the Paris climate agreement) as well as statements included in the NSS reflect the U.S. becoming a main reference to itself which – in the beginning – was symbolically represented in the Trump's campaign slogan "America first." It is also one of the similarities between U.S. and China where the policy towards United States is also a separate issue unique decision making process, with separate importance ("first among equals") methods and instruments used.

National Security Strategy (published in 2017) presents its main conclusions in the very beginning describing China as "growing military, political, economic competitor around the world attempting to erode American security and prosperity" (Trump 2017, p. 2). People's Republic of China is presented (together with Russia, North Korea, Iran and jihadist terrorist groups) as revisionist power. Afterwards, the NSS describes different aspects of China's involvement in revision of current international order, which – the order – is based on U.S. superiority and security guarantees (in Europe, Middle East, and also South-East Asia). The negative involvement also involves China "expanding its unfair practices and investing in key industries, sensitive technologies and infrastructure" (ibid., p. 1). In the strategy we can find declarations of U.S. presenting its counteroffers to the countries from the Asia-Pacific as a way to contain China and grow trade and investment dynamics between U.S. and Asian partners.

Strategies published by both administrations share similarities and provide examples of differences between Obama's and Trump's administrations. Looking from the perspective of problem diagnosis, evaluation of China's main policy points and identification of controversial and problematic issues by Obama administration is unsurprisingly similar to Donald Trump. The long time list of IPR theft, cybersecurity violations, reciprocity problems, market openness problems, devaluation of Chinese currency, hegemonic policy in East Asia were and still are main controversies between China and U.S. But methods, instruments implemented and attitude (important especially from the perspective of modern media

environment) presented by Trump's administration are different. Indefinitely, under president's Trump there is a continuation of an attitude of confrontation but with major reduction or even cancelation of cooperation aspects (despite rhetoric statements in the context of current trade and political disputes which mainly are part of negotiation process). With China's changing status on international arena and its growing foreign policy assertiveness the inability raises to achieve compromise on cooperation (especially on trade and investment) especially with diminishing possibilities (in comparison to Obama's policy) and common grounds (e.g. on climate agreement, Iran and Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). Trump's objective also sound uncertain, mixed and keep changing from economic requests to political demands (such as policy change on South China Sea). U.S. is no longer keeping its usual catalogue of grievances towards China but – as presented in the vice president M. Pence's speech at Hudson Institute – also expending them on political matters such as China's interference in the elections, undermining American political system and influencing American society through Chinese students, Chinese companies and Chinese cultural institutions (Hudson Institute 2018).

### 3. China's policy framework

As appeared above China was not sure about the effect of new president's policy on China-U.S. relations. The cooperation trend visible in the Obama's policy, as well as the successes in the foreign policy sectors (Iran and JCPOA) and economy (cybersecurity agreement) were positive from the perspective of Chinese authorities. The status quo of existing disputes but on-going negotiations with very little substantial effects served Chinese interests especially in terms of economy: growing trade imbalance on U.S. side (with special opportunities concerning IT products e.g. microchips); and investment opportunities in high-tech sectors. It was also highly visible in the global politics with South China Sea as an example where U.S. failed to deliver a substantial answer to China's raising status and practically gaining full control over the area. The election of D. Trump created an uncertain perspective for China but definitely with an expectation of coming problems which justified calling that "a certain election outcome with an uncertain direction" and putting Donald Trump's becoming president as the "Black Swan" effect together with Brexit (Xu 2017, pp. 277–290). According to some Chinese experts Donald Trump and Brexit were the two most

prominent problems facing China and the entire world in 2016. Here is also an important quotation by one of the renowned Chinese scholars which gives a clear understanding of confusion between Chinese power apparatus and scholars on current U.S. policy: “Some U.S. watchers in China, myself included, find the country we have studied for years increasingly unrecognizable and unpredictable. We should do our own self-reflection to examine what went wrong. Political polarization, power struggles, scandals, a lack of confidence in national establishments, tweets doubling as policy announcements, the frequent replacement of top officials in charge of foreign affairs, vacancies in important government positions – similar problems existed before, but their intensity and scope have been particularly stunning since the 2016 U.S. presidential election” (Wang 2018).

So with president Trump in office and his unclear policies in the beginning and radical turn afterwards the evaluation of current relations seemed to underline the double-sided approach: on one hand relations with U.S. are special and essential for China’s growth and economy reforms, on the other China – due to its ideological stance and political interests – should respond to Trump’s actions with tough responses and challenge U.S. on international arena. Anyhow, the general attitude was that with D. Trump China-U.S. relations entered a new era and “(...) were still in a complicated situation in which the competition and cooperation coexisted (...)” (Cui 2018, p. 370). The thinking is still mixed between providing a strong response on the basis of national identity, strategic rivalry and national proud but in the same time keeping the possibilities of cooperation open, as crucial from the perspective of China’s economy, future reforms and competition on technological revolution.

China was surprised with Trump’s policies and his sometimes chaotic but radical and unpredictable style of doing politics. Such a decision making style stood against Chinese political culture, structured and hierarchic style with informal but very respected communication and dispute settling mechanisms and procedures. The challenge Trump’s presidency provided was somehow managed by nominating people with American experience to governmental and state postings at the National People’s Congress in March 2018.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese leadership viewed it as a possible solution of increasing understanding and communication which it believed was the main problem in defining Trump’s policy and reaching

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3 Such as vice president Wang Qishan, vice premier Liu He and state councilor (and Politburo member) Yang Jiechi (on behalf of CPC in charge of foreign policy coordination).

compromises in the bilateral negotiations. But the reality of U.S.'s policy towards China in the coming months of 2018 proved the personal changes in the Chinese leadership unsuccessful. Afterwards the relations reached their worst level since many years resulting in current trade disputes and raising narrative and comparisons even to the "cold war period" with China being casted in the role of "Soviet Union."

Even though chairman Xi Jinping and Chinese authorities are interested in restoring positive relations (the status quo like during Obama's presidency) in the same time they are stuck in their own narrative. It is a combination of politics of memory and nationalism with major slogan of "rejuvenation of a Chinese nation." In that sense the official propaganda and party message is about an end to the domination of the West. As Justyna Szczudlik wrote quoting famous and officially promoted Chinese slogans: "East is going up, West is going down" and "South is going up, North is going down. Such statements underscore the feeling within China's circles of power that the world's political and economic center of gravity is shifting from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region" (Szczudlik 2018, p. 2). So is U.S. losing its superior position and ability to force political and economic decisions on others.

In the foreign policy context the new attitude influencing U.S.-China disputes was originally constructed by Chinese scholar prof. Yan Xuetong and described as "striving for achievement." The reference for that policy was mainly China's relations with the U.S. where the former should not pose a challenge to the latter and avoid "zero-sum games." The approach was meant to secure Chinese interests in the process of the country's aspirations for a "national rejuvenation" and possible (in the eyes of Chinese scholars, an unavoidable) clash with American global dominance (Przychodniak 2017, pp. 5–18). The SFA policy was even more influenced and strengthened by the ongoing centralization of power which hardened China's stance on many difficult issues facing the international community. It meant China's taking a radical change in its foreign policy which hardly helped the cooperation with U.S. and ability to reach compromise in the negotiations under Trump's expectations. It seemed like the SFA strategy already proofed its failure in overcoming the eventual "problems" it should help overcoming, such as problems with the U.S.

During the 13<sup>th</sup> NPC Congress chairman Xi openly expressed China's targets in the international arena, but without directly mentioning United States. He said: "China endeavors to uphold international fairness and justice. China advocates that all issues in the world should be settled

through consultation among people around the world, and will not impose its will on others. China will continue to actively participate in the evolution and construction of the global governance system" (Xi 2018). These words were just a shortened version of his statements delivered at 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress when he was also elected for the second term as CPC chairman. Xi committed to "all-round efforts in the pursuit of major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, thus advancing China's diplomatic agenda in a comprehensive, multilevel, multifaceted way and creating a favorable external environment for China's development" (Xi 2017).

Here Xi also elaborated on his main foreign policy slogan: a community of shared mankind, which "can be realized only in a peaceful international environment and under a stable international order. We must keep in mind both our internal and international imperatives, stay on the path of peaceful development (...). We will uphold justice while pursuing shared interests, and will foster new thinking on common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security" (ibid.). Xi indirectly addresses the possibility of conflict with U.S. with diplomatic but strong statement: "China will never pursue development at the expense of others' interests, but nor will China ever give up its legitimate rights and interests. No one should expect us to swallow anything that undermines our interests" (ibid.). Such a statement is deeply rooted in the belief of many years of humiliation which now due to the raising Chinese capabilities is over. But this also means that no power is able to dictate China's its way of development, political system or economical solutions. It was especially underlined by vice president Wang Qishan at Innovation Economic Forum in Singapore where he said: "Socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era. History, reality and the future are closely linked. Understanding China's history and culture is the only way to understand the path, theory, system and cultural support China has chosen. The great achievements of China's reform and opening up in the past 40 years cannot be separated from the hard struggle of nearly 70 years since the founding of New China" (Xinhua 2018).

Both speeches being the most important determinants of China's policy provide with a feeling of a certain attitude of China's dissatisfaction of current US-led international order and its purpose to offer a better way than the Western one. The "instruments" Western countries (which mainly means U.S.) use are dollar-hegemony and "so-called" universal values. China use Trump's victory in the elections as another example of faults of Western democracy (*xiwang zhendang*) together with migration,

terrorism etc. U.S. has neither monopoly on economic leadership nor on security – NATO is expanding security of its members while in the same time reducing security of the others countries in the international arena. China openly suggest a different model – a Chinese protected umbrella where through wide participation all the interested parties are receiving an increase of security. China is in the same time rhetorically taking over the foreign policy slogans and ideas used by U.S. under Obama but abandoned by Trump’s administration (unilateralism vs. multilateralism, globalization versus protectionism). And while all the three important aspects of transatlantic relations are currently gone or endangered due to Trump’s policies and expectations (trade/security/shared values) China is promoting its models and foreign policy making. The idea of rivalry between “world of order” and “world of disorder” are some of the ideas considered and promoted by the leadership. Here, China sets itself the major representative of the world of order with specific political opportunities, economic offers for the world (BRI) and adjustable set of values. U.S. is believed to still be a part of the world of order competing with China on attracting the countries placed in the “world of disorder” (Wang 2018).

#### 4. Influence on Asia

The change of methods in the policy towards China and raise of unilateralism in U.S. foreign policy increased the awareness and anxieties of United States regional partners – especially in South-East Asia. Facing the possibility of economic disadvantages (cancellation of TPP) and decrease of security guarantees (DPRK issue with Trump’s indefinite policy towards North Korea and security umbrella over South Korea and Japan) most of these countries developed a certain cautious attitudes towards the change in U.S. policy and China’s assertive behavior in the region. Countries of the Pacific (with special emphasis on Japan) decided to follow with the new TPP (excluding U.S.).

Due to the failure of U.S. expectations of possible agreement with China (which were still present during and after the bilateral visits of Xi Jinping and D. Trump) and raise of negative trade and political decisions of U.S. administration. United States is sending its signals of reviving some regional initiatives constructed as a form of growing U.S. presence in the region and containing China. But initiatives like Quad Revival or offers and commitments for countries in the Indo-Pacific are still not

enough to convince partners on the U.S. honest needs to construct its regional policy on the multilateral basis (Nicholas & Watts 2018; Wong 2018). This uncertainty of U.S. business attitude towards China and possibility of an agreement between Trump and Xi is still present in the policies of South East Asian partners. This is mostly typical to South Korea and Japan which are technically tied by the security agreements and trying to influence Trump's policy on both directions: China and DPRK. But as South Korea is speeding up the reconciliation process with its Northern counter partner, Japan is also strengthening communication with China (prime minister Abe visit to China) the motives are clear.

## 5. Conclusions and perspectives

China – U.S. relations got worse right from the very beginning after the U.S. presidential elections in 2016. The spiral which started with difficult beginning went through reasonable relationship (symbolized by Trump's visit to China and Xi Jinping's visit to Washington) and is now stuck in the rhetorical and even open rivalry and confrontation (trade disputes and restrictions towards Chinese investment and companies in U.S.).

Obama's policy was all about cooperation in its narrative but over the years he and his administration managed to achieve some progress on confrontational and problematic issues. These were mostly: trade issues (disputes under WTO and the development of TPP), introduced climate change as previously non-existing factor of cooperation (China's declaration on reducing emissions), reaching a cybersecurity agreement, regularly performing Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea and raising U.S. political relations with ASEAN countries through series of important political visits on bilateral basis or attendance to regional summits.

As to current administration it shared the observations on China's interference in U.S. interests which its predecessors had but until now it failed to deliver any substantial results. The change of China's policy happened mostly due to internal political reasons: keeping the Donald's Trump campaign promises, pleasing the Republican electorate and diverting attention from Trump's relations with Russia. The series of policy decisions (trade tariffs, restriction on Chinese students, scholars, investment restrictions; ZTE and Huawei limitations) delivered strong message of dissatisfaction to Chinese but until now failed to reach any concessions

in the most burning issues. So as Obama failed to deliver but was able to keep the dialogue and negotiations going, Trump also failed to accomplish any progress but made the possibility of compromise with China much harder and probably impossible in the short term perspective.

China by no means still remains conflicted over the attitude towards U.S.: between the needs to reform (mostly economical) which is impossible without American companies, its technological solutions and developed market. Until now China has expansively used these opportunities and this is the reason why – despite all the one-sided decisions Trump has made – is still ready to come back to the table to restore the status quo. But the political rhetoric used by Xi Jinping and other leaders makes it impossible to achieve a compromise and step back in order to fulfill certain U.S. demands. Strategic rivalry with U.S. which – indirectly – remains a crucial factor in China's foreign policy and build-up of a new Chinese nation ideology also serves as a conflicting point in settling issues with United States. Optimistic point is here that since for China stabilizing the relations is the key from both economic and strategic perspective the possibility of reducing the tensions is still possible.

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