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The Trump-Zelenskyy Confrontation: Setting the Stage for a Renewal in China-Southeast Asia Relations

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SYNOPSIS

The Trump-Zelenskyy Oval Office confrontation exposed the vulnerabilities of the Trump administration and Washington's shift away from global leadership. As US commitments weaken, China may capitalise on the opportunity to strengthen ties with Europe and the Global South — particularly Southeast Asia — with the goal of breaking out of its diplomatic predicament and tilting global power dynamics in its favour.

COMMENTARY

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited Washington on 28 February with the hopes of acquiring US security guarantees as part of the US-Ukraine minerals deal, critical to a lasting ceasefire with Russia. However, the Trump administration showed no interest in offering Ukraine such assurances and the Oval Office meeting quickly collapsed. Over this dispute, President Donald Trump and Vice-President JD Vance attacked and mocked the Ukrainian leader. To add insult to injury, the Ukrainian president was "[told to leave](#)" the White House after the altercation and departed the United States.

The unprecedented event shocked the world. European leaders quickly [rallied behind Zelenskyy](#), while [Russian officials praised Trump](#). The incident demonstrated the ills of Trumpian diplomacy and revealed novel insights into the current US administration.

First and foremost, Trump's "America First" ideology completely dominates the administration's thinking. US interests, as defined by Trump, take absolute precedence over those of other nations. Weaker states must either submit to US designs or risk losing its support. Second, there is a crisis in US leadership. Neither

Trump nor Vance appears adept at handling complex foreign policy challenges or understanding the intricacies of diplomacy. Third, Trump has built an echo chamber and surrounded himself with enablers who provide no checks on his impulsive decisions, heightening the risk of conflict escalation. Last but not least, the US government is clearly in chaos. At home, Trump has thrown the federal government into disarray [through mass firings](#) and [major budget cuts](#). In foreign policy, the administration seems strategically confused — lacking long-term objectives, carefully considered methods, and basic diplomatic tact.



The Trump-Zelenskyy Oval Office clash on 28 February 2025 highlighted the United States' waning interest in global leadership. *Image source: Wikimedia Commons.*

America's Losses and China's Gains

As illustrated during the Oval Office meeting, the Trump administration is no longer interested in defending the post-World War 2 international order — the *Pax Americana* that fostered 80 years of peace, stability, and economic growth. Despite imperfections in US leadership, this long era of relative peace led to substantial advancements in human development. Now, with the United States in retreat, a power vacuum is apparent in global leadership. The abandonment of Ukraine indicates America's unwillingness to deter unjust wars, even in the case of a large authoritarian state invading a much smaller democracy. This raises the risk of conflict around the world.

As global disorder grows, so does the demand for stability and reliable leadership. Just two months ago, the thought of China appearing as a more rational actor than the United States seemed far-fetched. However, given the low bar set by the Trump administration, China's business-as-usual and trade-oriented foreign policy now seem a lot less threatening to the world order.

On 24 February, [China abstained](#) from a United Nations (UN) vote to condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine, while the United States voted against the resolution — siding with Russia against most of the world, particularly its key European allies. Furthermore, in his attempt to negotiate an end to the Ukraine conflict, Trump conceded to most of Russia's demands and [exerted significant pressure](#) on the Ukrainian government to accept an unfavourable ceasefire coupled with the [lopsided minerals deal](#) with the United States. The United States is now morphing into a revisionist power by aligning with Russia, seeking to sabotage the international system

it constructed decades ago. Following the Trump-Zelenskyy confrontation, members of the [Republican Party](#) and the powerful [Elon Musk](#) even floated the prospect of the United States leaving NATO and the UN. Meanwhile, China has remained steady in its diplomatic engagements, contrasting itself as a stable and pro-status quo power — an alternative to the chaos coming out of Washington.

It is obvious that the world is undergoing tectonic geopolitical shifts. These upheavals present China with a perfect opening to break out of its diplomatic quandary by improving relations with a disillusioned Europe that seeks to significantly [reduce its reliance on the United States](#), and with the Global South that has largely benefited from the prevailing international order.

China-Southeast Asia Relations: Poised to Improve

Within this context, China is likely to focus its coming diplomatic efforts on European Union (EU) states and the countries of the Global South, including Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. In particular, China's influence in Southeast Asia is set to increase in the near future.

China already enjoys good relations with most Southeast Asian countries. It is the region's [largest trading partner](#) and one of its biggest sources of foreign direct investment. Most Southeast Asian countries have actively participated in the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) and support other Chinese-led economic initiatives. Despite occasional disagreements, Southeast Asian political elites generally try to maintain cordial relations with their Chinese counterparts. Moreover, China and several Southeast Asian armed forces regularly hold [joint exercises](#) to deepen military-to-military relations.

Although tensions in the South China Sea persist, most claimants still value stable relations with Beijing. Even as [maritime clashes between China and the Philippines](#) have risen in recent years, they have not significantly impacted China's relations with other Southeast Asian states.

With the United States retreating from global leadership, China is poised to advance its influence. Unlike Trump's first administration that retained some talented and experienced members of the US political establishment, in his second term, Trump has stacked his cabinet with loyalists who lack both expertise and strategic foresight. Key members of the Trump cabinet, such as Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, Director of National Intelligence [Tulsi Gabbard](#), and FBI Director [Kash Patel](#), have minimal experience in managing federal agencies and are known for their antagonism towards the bureaucracy.

The lack of qualifications is reflected in foreign affairs as well. For example, Defense Secretary Hegseth did not know what ASEAN was and was [unable to name any of its member states](#). It is entirely conceivable that Hegseth is not the only cabinet official with such a knowledge gap. Even Trump himself [appears uninformed](#) about Southeast Asia, exhibiting [an attitude of indifference](#). So far, he has yet to issue direct tariff threats against the region — an approach he has frequently employed against other major manufacturing hubs.

Given the poor leadership in Washington and the “America First” ideology that will govern US foreign policy in the next four years, US commitments to Southeast Asia are likely going to be inconsistent at best. For Southeast Asian leaders monitoring recent US actions, the burning question is probably: if the United States is already turning on Europe, its longest-standing and most cherished ally, what will become of its pledges to Southeast Asia? Against this backdrop, Southeast Asian countries are expected to be more receptive to Chinese diplomatic overtures.

Although Southeast Asian states are unlikely to accept China as a security guarantor, Beijing’s assurances of economic stability and trade continuity will resonate with the region’s leaders. Greater Chinese influence in regional affairs inevitably leads to stronger ties. China will likely seek greater market access, security cooperation, and political engagement.

Conclusion

The Trump-Zelenskyy confrontation represents a turning point in US global leadership. It underscored the United States’ rapidly changing foreign policy goals and exposed the vulnerabilities of the Trump administration in dealing with complex world affairs. Moreover, the event demonstrated to developing countries the risks of closely associating with a United States that is becoming increasingly unstable and unpredictable.

The [US retreat from its global responsibilities](#) and [alignment with revisionist powers](#) is bound to increase worldwide demand for stability and reliable leadership. China will likely seize this opportunity to improve its foreign relations and break out of its diplomatic predicament, focusing on the EU and the Global South, which benefit from the current international order. These manoeuvres could reverse China’s fortunes in the US-China rivalry and put Beijing in a position of strength.

Despite on-going disputes, China and Southeast Asian states are likely to draw closer. As a region dependent on steady global trade yet vulnerable to international conflicts, Southeast Asia needs assurances, goodwill, and constructive relations with its largest neighbour. Likewise, China hopes to further expand its influence in Southeast Asia, a region that has long relied on the United States as its security guarantor. While the future of the world looks increasingly volatile, the common desire for certainty may ultimately close the gap between China and Southeast Asia.

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