



Is a US-China Rapprochement on the Cards?

Benjamin Tze Ern Ho



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- US President Donald Trump's unconventional approach to diplomacy may yet proffer unexpected outcomes down the road.
- A US-China rapprochement will happen only if both countries align their interests.
- It is incumbent upon policy interlocutors and public intellectuals from both countries to provide a faithful rendition of the circumstances and reality of what is happening around them.

COMMENTARY

During the historic 1972 meeting between US President Richard Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong, Mao was said to have joked, telling Nixon "I voted for you during your last election." Laughing, Nixon said, "you voted for the lesser of the two evils", to which Mao replied, "I like rightists, I am comparatively happy when these people on the right come into power."

These statements from the two leaders reveal a highly pragmatic approach to international politics in which both saw the need to work with one another to pursue common goals even if their countries were ideologically divided. Mao recognised that Nixon, a prominent anti-communist figure, was willing to engage in a strategic shift, which pleased him. More crucially, the shift allowed Mao to at once transform the image of the United States from that of an enemy to a friend (given both countries' hostility towards the Soviet Union) while ensuring that the ideological base of Chinese communism remained intact. Likewise, Nixon's depiction of the incumbent Democratic vice-president whom he defeated in the presidential election (Hubert Humphrey) as the greater of two evils provided himself with an unconventional perch from which to forge the unlikely partnership that he did between a Republican president and a communist leader.

Unconventional but Effective

More than five decades on, it would seem that the leaders of the two countries may be taking a page from the same playbook.

President Donald Trump's unconventional approach to American foreign policy is evidenced by his self-proclaimed uncanny ability to "make deals". From his "liberation day" global tariffs and [bombing Iranian nuclear facilities](#) to [meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin](#), hardly a day goes by without Trump casting himself in the front, left and centre of American politics – both in the domestic and international spheres. While many have questioned the somewhat unpredictable and eccentric approach Trump pursues, few would complain that he had not been effective so far in procuring what he thinks is best for America (whether others agree or not is a separate matter).

By casting his Democratic predecessors (Joe Biden and Barack Obama) as weak and ineffectual in curbing Russia's aggression, Trump has placed himself in a position where he is able to frame whatever he does as a strong and muscular response to Putin (again, there will be those who disagree). Likewise, in US-China relations, Trump is casting himself as the one in charge. Perhaps cognisant of the strongman style of politics practised in Beijing, Trump frequently touts his personal relationship with President Xi Jinping – an unorthodox style with which to find common ground with his Chinese counterpart. How these moves with Putin and Xi would play out in the long run remains to be seen and may yet yield unexpected outcomes somewhere down the road.

Is Rapprochement on the Cards?

That said, few would place their bets on a quick end to the frosty atmosphere that has characterised the relationship between Washington and Beijing for the last decade, and a return to a more cooperative posture. This is because fundamental differences continue to dog the bilateral relationship. *Put simply, China sees the United States as wanting to contain its rise and claim to legitimate development and prosperity while the United States views China as wanting to challenge its international (and regional) primacy.* Such a mentality – a result of a decade of negative narratives about one another, and no doubt amplified by the coronavirus pandemic (which Trump believes derailed his 2020 presidency) – has led to a spiralling cycle of suspicion and distrust where each side sees the other as being responsible for the problems it faces. In other words, for rapprochement to take place, more than just political showmanship – by Trump or Xi, for that matter – is required.



Any meeting between US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping would at best constitute a partial easing of tensions and not a full-fledged rapprochement. Image source: [Flickr](#).

First, both countries would have to identify a common goal that they are prepared to work towards. COVID-19 provided an excellent opportunity to cooperate, which was unfortunately lost as both countries [traded barbs over the origins of the coronavirus](#) and ended up becoming even more distant from each other. Conflicts in Europe and the Middle East have also highlighted the ideological cleavages inherent in the worldviews of both countries, which are not likely to be easily bridged. These differences are now spilling into the fields of technology and artificial intelligence as each country seeks to achieve dominance over the other. In the absence of a meaningful common goal to cooperate towards, it is difficult to see the relationship improving.

Second, both countries would have to decide what they are competing for. This may sound counterintuitive since competition is often associated with tensions and political instability. But as any seasoned athlete would know, competition is part and parcel of improving one's own performance by comparing one's ability with others – so long as the rules of the competition are adhered to. This is where it becomes challenging because it is not clear whether Washington and Beijing are competing for the same prize or even bound by the same rules. Take the Taiwan issue as an example. Both countries view Taiwan as an important prize in their geopolitical competition, but for different reasons. US policymakers' recent calls for US allies to express stronger commitment towards Taiwan are somewhat ironical given that the United States itself continues to insist on strategic ambiguity in its Taiwan policy. On the other hand, Chinese intransigence that Taiwan is an internal issue is disingenuous given how connected Taiwan is to the outside world and the fact that any conflict over Taiwan would have ripple effects in the rest of the world. In other words, while the *issue* of Taiwan's sovereignty may be an internal matter, the *implications* of who governs Taiwan is an international matter.

Finally, much will also depend on the ability of both the American and Chinese leaderships to ensure that whatever agreements (or deals) struck now are sustained into the future, well beyond their respective administrations. In other words, it is one thing to make a grand deal, but another to ensure that such a deal is not simply a short-term spectacle but carries with it longer-term value.

As alluded to earlier, Trump's penchant for the unpredictable and sometimes spectacular has made the practice of diplomatic statecraft a more uncertain game. In terms of America's China policy, some have even suggested that Trump himself is making all the key decisions. In the same vein, Xi's stranglehold on Chinese politics has, to some extent, made institutional arrangements more complicated. For instance, the [sacking of generals from the People's Liberation Army](#) and [removal from office of top diplomats like Qin Gang and Liu Jianchao](#) have made it harder to maintain institutional continuity within the Chinese government. This state of affairs does not bode well for US-China relations, especially if there is a lack of institutional capacity to carry out decisions that are made.

Finessing the End Game

Given the dynamics of the current relationship between Washington and Beijing, any meeting between Trump and Xi (if it happens) would at best constitute a partial easing of tensions and not a full-fledged rapprochement. That said, a limited engagement is

better than none at all. The question then is what the endgame of a US-China competition would look like. Based on current evidence, it would seem that the best-case scenario would be an extension of the status quo without any significant breakthroughs or mishaps. At the same time, differences over Taiwan and technology have made the preservation of the status quo much more difficult to maintain. Given the precarious situation, there is an urgent need for policy interlocutors and public intellectuals from both sides to disseminate an accurate portrayal of the geopolitical reality to their leaders in the hope that wiser minds can counsel a pathway towards a realistic endgame.

Benjamin Ho is an Assistant Professor in the China Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

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