



By: **Stephen S. Roach**

What should America's post-Trump China strategy be?



With the United States in the hands of an unstable president, diplomacy is not the answer for a conflict-prone US-China relationship.

The striking contrast between US President Donald Trump's intrinsic volatility and Chinese President Xi Jinping's strategic resolve plays to China's great advantage – and means that effective conflict resolution is a task for the post-Trump era.

It wasn't always this way. Diplomacy was at the forefront of Sino-American engagement in the early 1970s.

Well-practiced in the art of grand strategy, Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai, answering to President Richard Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong, masterfully crafted a **Cold War triangulation** that redefined great-power relations.

In the intervening years, leader-to-leader summits became the template for maintaining bilateral ties.

But the rise of politically constrained, egocentric leaders – often deluded into believing that they possessed superior skills of personal persuasion – made disputes between the two superpowers exceedingly difficult to avoid, let alone resolve.

Neither side could afford to be seen as weak, and Sino-American conflict resolution became an exercise in saving face.

Destructive Sinophobia

The emergence of new strains of nationalism in the US and China has also hampered diplomacy, which derives its legitimacy from domestic politics.

The US is in the grip of a destructive **Sinophobia**. Notwithstanding America's corrosive polarization, anti-China sentiment enjoys broad bipartisan support.

The US diplomatic agenda reflects this

increasingly strident bias.

Despite its one-party system, political considerations are equally important in China.

Xi's power rests on his promise to achieve the **Chinese Dream**, or “the great renewal of the Chinese nation.”

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But without sustained economic growth, Xi risks failing to keep that promise and facing a wave of public and party anger.

That makes China's growth shortfall, which partly stems from its ongoing conflict with the US, especially concerning.

The economic ramifications of a mounting “**rejuvenation deficit**” have undoubtedly constrained Chinese politics.

Fragile egos exacerbate the problem. Rhetorical miscues are blown out of proportion.

When leaders lack the self-confidence to shrug off criticism, the hair-trigger reactions of personalized diplomacy backfire.

Still, many cling to the belief that leader-to-leader summits – the pinnacle of such diplomacy – hold the key to US-China conflict resolution. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The summits are unlikely to reshape bilateral relations

There have been 22 such summits since the breakthrough Nixon-Mao meetings in 1972.

Most of them, apart from the 1979 summit between Deng Xiaoping and Jimmy Carter that established formal diplomatic relations, have

accomplished very little.

Two glitzy summits between Xi and Trump in 2017 – a formal dinner at Mar-a-Lago and a ceremonial gathering in Beijing's Forbidden City – were followed quickly by the onset of tariffs and the first wave of the US-China trade war in 2018-19.

Trump and Xi risk repeating the same cycle in 2026. After a **brief meeting** in October on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Busan, South Korea, they have tentatively agreed to hold two leader-to-leader **summits in 2026**.

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Yet without clearly defined agendas, these summits are unlikely to reshape bilateral relations.

The best that can be hoped for is stasis on the contentious issues of trade, technology, people-to-people exchange, and Taiwan.

But even that might be optimistic: The Trump administration's new **\$11 billion arms package** for Taiwan could be a fresh source of Sino-American instability.

Rapprochement with China

As long as a **belligerent** Trump, or one of his acolytes, remains in power in the US, there is very little chance of a sustained resolution to the Sino-American conflict.

On-again, off-again "deals" offer no hope for lasting stability, not least because of their reliance on the conflicts they purportedly aim to resolve – without conflict, there can be no deals.



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At the same time, China is far from a white knight providing stable political leadership in a tumultuous world.

This suggests that a major shift in the political winds is the best hope for US-China diplomacy.

Of course, Xi has consolidated power, making such a shift practically impossible in China's one-party system.

Political change may prove equally challenging in the US, which is under the spell of Sinophobia and riven by Trump's MAGA movement.

That doesn't mean America can't rediscover its magnanimous spirit and once again embrace the mantle of global leadership, as it did after World War II by supporting its defeated enemies and rebuilding Western Europe with the Marshall Plan.

Avoiding kinetic conflict with China will depend on the US living up to its reputation as a "shining city upon a hill."

But to get from the chaos of today's polarized America to a new era of coherence, civility, and conflict resolution may require nothing short of a political watershed.

For many Americans, such a shift currently seems improbable as Trump tightens his grip on government.

But since the mid-1850s, **presidential party**

affiliation has changed hands between Republicans and Democrats in 19 of 44 elections; since the end of WWII, the frequency of party turnover has been even higher. The same applies to control of both the House and the Senate.

All this points to the likelihood that MAGA will not dominate America's future in the long run.

For that reason alone, it is not too early to start thinking about rapprochement with China as a key feature of a post-Trump foreign-policy agenda, especially as pulling it off will most likely require a new architecture of engagement.

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